Murder at High Tide

Charles G. Booth

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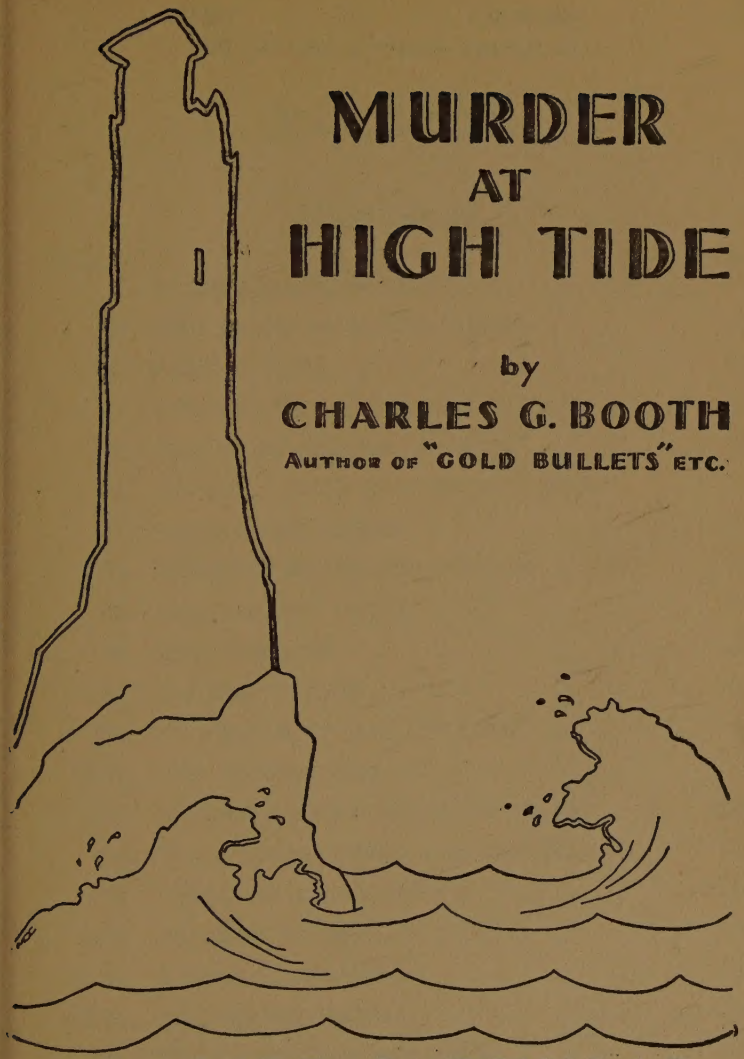
by

CHARLES G. BOOTH

Author of "GOLD BULLETS" etc.



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MURDER AT HIGH TIDE

I

TO BUILD A MONUMENT

As soon as the launch had put into the cove I had felt that there was something wrong with the place. Now, as I stood in Dan Parados' library, I was sure of it.

Philip Morrison, my partner and, as he frequently reminds me, my senior by some twenty years, says I am altogether too impressionable for the antique business. Morrison is fifty and wise and I suppose he is right; nevertheless, as I looked around the room again, my impression was strengthened. There was not much wrong physically with it. The furniture and draperies were expensive rather than tasteful and a good many of the books had been bought for their bindings, but that was all—in a material sense. You cannot easily ruin a library. What I am getting at is that impression of human personality which pervades a room after it has been lived in for a good while. The new houses do not have it.

If you are sensitive to that sort of thing you will know what I mean when I tell you that I felt arrogant wealth and restrained violence and contempt for human institutions. All the sins, in fact, were here; the little sins and the big sins. Their shadow darkened the gaudy sunset and made me think of the spirit that must have haunted the castle of Macbeth when Duncan came. If you are not, you will probably put my feeling down to the uneasy stomach given to me by the rough six-mile crossing by launch from La Playa to the island, where Parados spent his week-ends—to-day was Friday—and agree with Morrison that a man of thirty ought to have got over his susceptibility to impressions ten years ago.

Ever since I had set foot on the island I had been aware of water churning in a confined space near by, and as the uproar it made was both terrific and ominous, it is quite possible that my pessimistic reflections had been colored by it. The uproar had its source, the boatman told me, in The Gut, a funnel-shaped fissure at the head of the cove. When the tide was full, as it happened to be at this particular hour, the fury of the imprisoned waters reached its height. Once or twice I felt the house vibrate.

It was Morrison, the senior partner of Morrison & Hunt, whom Parados had telegraphed for from Los Angeles and I wondered what sort of a reception the junior partner was going to get. A commission from Dan Parados meant a good deal to us and nothing short of the sharp attack of neuritis Morrison was suffering from when the telegram came could have persuaded him to remain in San Francisco while I went in his place. Morrison had primed me with instructions to say this and that and to do thus and so, and while my excitement at the prospect of meeting Parados had driven most of them out of my mind I was still a trifle apprehensive.

Parados was a fascinating figure. Wickedness is always fascinating and Parados had not been called "The most sinister figure on the Coast" for nothing. His place in Hollywood was a palace, but his instincts were those of a Cæsar and San Lucas Island, every acre of which he owned, permitted him to play the petty tyrant as hard as he liked. The sprawling, tile-roofed hacienda two hundred feet above the travail of rock and spray and yellow sand at the bottom of the sandstone cliffs contributed to the illusion, I didn't doubt.

But it was *not* an illusion, I corrected myself. The man's power had become stupendously real. He was of that type—a fairly common one in our American civilization—which creeps along the back alleys and through the half-lights of our cities until it has acquired wealth, when

it employs bribery and corruption to lift itself above the law. Parados boasted that he had no friends because friends were more dangerous than enemies, that fear and hatred were the only emotions he cared to inspire in the hearts of those around him, and that he never paid for anything he could get for nothing. In the abstract, the man was incredible, yet he had made himself as dangerously real as a stab in the back.

This was the sort of man I had come to see. My slight apprehension had nothing whatever to do with that fantastic sense of "wrongness" which had come upon me as the launch put into the cove and again as I was shown into the library. That was something else.

"Are you Mr. Morrison?"

The arrogant voice came from my left. I shall never forget Dan Parados as I saw him when I turned my head. He was stepping through the doors of a French window on the west side of the room. Directly behind him was the red oven of the setting sun and as I stared at him, half blinded by the fiery glow, his burly peasant's body seemed to surge towards me on the crest of a flood of molten metal.

"No," I said diffidently. "Mr. Morrison is ill. He asked me to convey his regrets. I am Allan Hunt, the junior partner."

The room had two other windows, also of the French type. One of these, a south window, opened upon a patio; the other, on the east side of the room, gave access to a tiled terrace which appeared to flank the patio. Between these two windows a handsome Chippendale writing table was placed in a diagonal position. A telephone stood on the desk, beside it a neat row of buttons. I learned afterwards that the instrument was connected with various rooms in the house and several departments outside. There was no connection between the island and the mainland. Parados dropped heavily into the chair behind the

desk, his left shoulder towards the terrace window, and waved me towards another chair, also on his left, and near the wall.

"It was Morrison I wanted!" he exclaimed angrily. "Why didn't you telegraph me he couldn't come?"

"Mr. Morrison has every confidence in my abilities," I was beginning, when he interrupted me violently.

"Confidence be damned! He was thinking of his two thousand dollar fee. When I pay for the best I want the best. How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine."

"And I suppose you know all there is to be known about this art junk?"

"I don't suppose anything of the kind," I was protesting heatedly, when he slapped the desk with his hand.

"Then why did Morrison send you? I was told he was the best man on the Coast in his line—that was why I telegraphed for him. And he sends me a simp who as good as tells me he knows nothing about the stuff I expect him to know everything about! You have the nerve to sit there and admit your incompetence?"

I was feeling pretty warm by this, and as I did not want to lose my head I took out a cigarette and I looked him over while I lighted it, instead of answering him. His peasant ancestry was apparent in his short legs and long arms, in his stocky shoulders and barrel of a chest, in his heavy hands, well-kept but covered with black hair and shaped to wrench a living from stubborn soils, in the coarse black hair that thatched his square head, and in his broad, swarthy face and blossoming ears. It was the arrogant tilt of his chin and the incandescence of his black eyes that proclaimed his power. His eyes would have been remarkable in any face. In anger their white heat would be irresistible. His full lips were despotic and sensual and I remembered that he was said to spoil every woman he got his hands on.

"I did not say that, Mr. Parados," I asserted forcefully, "but I take back whatever it was that I did say. I am not incompetent. I do know a great deal about pictures and antiques. Not everything, but a great deal. Not so much as Morrison does, but more than you do—more than any man you can put your hand on in Los Angeles does. Morrison wouldn't have taken me into his business if I didn't. What is more to the point, Morrison and I went over the Brent collection before you bought it and his judgment backs up my own."

"Oh, does it." He grinned sourly. "You are probably lying and if you are your fee won't do you any good. What do you know about the stuff?"

"It's worth around a quarter of a million," I went on, curbing my anger again. "That's the figure Morrison and I put on it." Pausing, I wondered if I should risk saying what was in my mind. I decided to. "You probably swindled it out of the estate for a hundred thousand or so."

He chuckled grimly and I knew that I had been right in my belief that recognition of his shrewdness was the greatest compliment I could pay him. Lighting a cigar, he creaked back in his chair, a turban of smoke about his head.

"I paid ninety thousand for the lot," he announced boastfully. "How's that?"

I found myself thinking of John Brent and Don Ramon Velasquez and I shut my eyes, for it was impossible to think of Dan Parados at the same time. John Brent, the founder of the Californian branch of his family, had been a forty-niner and later on, one of the Vigilantes. He had washed a small fortune out of the hills, become a merchant and finally, a banker. The family had prospered until the close of the World War when reverses and off-color manipulation on the part of outside banking interests had ruined it. But the Brents had always lived honorably and

their name still stood for something in San Francisco. Don Ramon was of a different order, but of a similar quality. He had built the fort on San Lucas Island and died in it like the gallant gentleman he was. His son, Don Carlos, and his grandson, Don Miguel, who must have been of the last of the Californian gentry, had died in it too, and here, I reflected, opening my eyes, was Dan Parados, peasant fruit peddler and commission man, gambler and oil speculator, and all-round sport, bootlegger and grafter and master of corrupt politicians, and, more recently, respectable man of affairs, with the Brent collection in one hand and the Velasquez lands in the other. Life was queer.

"You were fortunate, Mr. Parados."

"Shrewd, my lad," he corrected me. "Dan Parados wouldn't be sitting on top of the heap if he hadn't kept an oilstone to his wits." He flicked cigar ash from the lapel of his dinner jacket. "Take the Velasquezs and the Brents. If they'd been shrewd and hard-hitting like me I wouldn't have the deed to San Lucas and a bill of sale for the Brent collection in my jeans." He shook his cigar at me, the heat of his eyes compelling my attention. "Keep 'em scared—pay only when you have to—and oil your wits. You'll make money even in the antique business, then."

I wondered if his shrewdness made him realize that the Velasquez and Brent kind had something he could never have.

"That's an interesting view of life," I remarked. "It's hard on the Brents and the Velasquezs, though."

"If a man can't hold what he's got he should lose it."

"You mean you wouldn't complain if some one were strong enough to take your wealth away from you?"

"Sure. I'm no squealer. But I'd like to see the boy that can do it," and he laughed boastfully. "I'd be about willing to lose everything I have to get an eyeful of him."

"If you lose your life you'd have lost everything, wouldn't you?"

It was an idiotic thing to say, but his magnificent conceit had got under my skin and the words were off my tongue before I had known they were there. His thick body shot upright in the chair and I thought he was going to hurl himself across the desk at me. I could almost feel his fingers at my throat.

"What d'you mean by that?" he shouted thickly.

His voice reflected the fury smoking in his eyes, but there was a foreign note in it that bothered me. It made me think of the ring of a gold coin with a lead filling and I wondered if I had accidentally sounded a base spot in the metal of this extraordinary man.

"I'm sorry," I said apologetically. "I suppose I was thinking of the impermanence of life. It was a crazy thing to say."

Fortunately the door opened at that moment. A girl entered.

Parados had not lighted the desk lamp and the room was getting dark, but she brought into it that glowing fluid grace of the perfect blonde and everything in the room on the instant seemed to define itself a little more clearly. I thought of a bit of peach-blow porcelain and a little ivory dancing nymph I had seen recently, but she possessed a distinctive quality that belonged to neither of those. I could not make up my mind whether it was good or evil. She placed a sheaf of typewritten letters in front of Parados, whose wrath had evaporated the instant she had appeared.

"Hello, girlie," he greeted her. "Got 'em done, have you?" He switched on the desk lamp. "This is my secretary, Miss Ferris, Hunt. Shake hands with Mr. Hunt, Celia. He is going to be with us for a day or two."

The girl's hand was cold, her hazel eyes were impersonal. As I mumbled something or other Parados slipped

his arm around her waist and drew her slender body against his burly shoulder. He probably intended me to infer that the gesture was a fatherly one, but I knew better; and if I had not, the startled look that suddenly animated the girl's impersonal expression would have told me better. Her eyes fled to the patio window as if she expected to see some one there. When they returned to mine they were desperately afraid. I was boiling with indignation, but I had sense enough to hold my tongue.

"We are glad to have you on San Lucas, Mr. Hunt," the girl said in a limpid voice. "We don't have many young men on San Lucas, do we, Daddy Parados?" and dropping her eyes to Parados' swarthy face she laughed in a hard, gay way, shaking her sheath of honey-colored hair.

"Enough of 'em," Parados grunted, frowning. "Run along, Celia."

The girl's eyes rested on mine for an instant before she melted into the shadows of the hall.

"Neat little baggage," Parados muttered, evidently to himself. And then, to me: "Where were we at?"

"I was wondering what you intended to do with the Brent collection," I said diplomatically.

"You know just what I have?"

"Yes, I think so. There are two Holbeins, a Corot, a Murillo, a couple of drawings by Landseer, and eighteen or twenty pieces from the minor masters. Not a modern in the lot. And then you have the pottery, Crown Derby, Ming, Chelsea, Sèvres, and a few odd pieces, if I remember rightly."

"That's it, I guess. I don't know anything about the stuff myself and I don't want to. Your job is to price and catalogue it. Dig up the history of each piece and write it down without any technical terms. So an ordinary dumbbell can understand it. See what I mean?"

I nodded, but his attitude puzzled me. "You don't

seem particularly interested in the collection, Mr. Parados."

"I'm not. Give me warm flesh and blood every time," and he laid his clenched hand on the desk, his eyes bulging a little. "But I bought 'em for a purpose, you bet your life. Dan Parados don't spend ninety thousand for nothing. After you are through with this lot you'll keep your eyes open for more bargains. See? I'm ready to spend a million—two or three, mebbe. And don't try to blow any smoke in my eyes," he cautioned me harshly, noticing the astonishment in my face. "There'll be three or four of you sharks on the job, every one of you watching the others."

"That's not a bad idea," I agreed, to humor him. "Do you intend to keep your collection here?"

"Yes, for a while." He looked at me keenly, as if he wanted me to appreciate the significance of what was to follow. "I'm going to give the stuff away."

"To a museum!" I exclaimed. "Is that what you have in mind?"

He nodded. "Something of the sort. Mebbe I'll found a museum of my own—'The Parados Memorial Museum.' How's that sound? Mebbe you can think up a better one. It's got to have 'Parados' in it, though."

"But I thought you said you weren't interested in that sort of thing!" I exclaimed.

He leaned across the table, bobbing the red end of his cigar at me. "It's none of your business, young feller, but you might as well know the rights of it. I came from a bad outfit and I've handled a good deal of dirt, one way or another. Get me straight, now. I haven't got religion or any of that bunk. I'm not ashamed of what I've done. It brought me my money and I'd do it again. But Dan Parados isn't going to live more'n another twenty or thirty years and he'd like to leave something behind him —something people will remember when they've forgotten

how he made his money. See? So he's taking up art. The Velasquezs are gone, the Brents are gone—get the idea?—but Dan Parados lives as long as his pictures."

He laughed explosively and I detested him more than ever, for I knew that he fully appreciated the ironic aspect of his ambition. Curbing his merriment, he leaned back in his chair, puffing hugely on his cigar, a wicked chuckle oozing out of his heavy body. The smoke thickened about his head and shoulders and arms, enlarging them enormously, but without dimming the fierce brilliance of his eyes. He threw back his head, smoke rings ascended from the red oval of his mouth, and I had the odd notion that Dan Parados was propitiating whatever gods he worshiped.

After all, it was not the first time that a bit of common clay had aspired to the aristocratic elegance of a Ming vase. And Parados had the virtues of strength and shrewdness. It was pathetic, though. I wondered if he had hoped to found a dynasty. That would be the natural ambition of such a man. Mrs. Parados, I recalled, had had no children. She would be getting along, too. I found myself thinking of the exquisite Celia and of Parados with his arm around her waist . . . and of the sharp fear in her eyes. What had that fear meant?

The thunder of The Gut impressed itself upon my senses more forcibly than ever. It invaded the room with the arrogance of a regal presence. The house quivered.

Parados seemed disposed to linger with his thoughts and I peered into the shadowy circle beyond the range of the lighted lamp. The room was square. Book shelves, the hall door, another door, and a fireplace occupied all of the north wall. A fire had not yet been lighted, but the grate was laid. Against the wall opposite the fireplace stood a heavy safe of ornamental design, its door open. My eyes traveled back to the fireplace. A dome-shaped glass case of the type used to house the stuffed remains of venerable

birds stood in the center of the mantel. It appeared to be empty and I wondered why it was empty.

Just then the latch of the patio window clicked and a man in a dinner jacket burst into the room, his feet falling noiselessly on the blue Turkey carpet. He was of medium height and slender build, and about forty, I thought. In the moment that elapsed before he saw me I set him down for one of those compact, tense individuals who are always building fences around their emotions. They swell the ranks of the nervous wrecks and suicides. A red spot burned on each of his high cheek bones; the rest of his thin face was the color of old porcelain. He clutched a folded newspaper with his left hand in such a way as to give me the impression that he held something between the two halves of the paper. He saw me, then, and the tension he was under snapped and he stopped abruptly.

Parados meanwhile had creaked forward in his chair, a destructive violence in his eyes.

"What d'you want, Annersley?"

"I thought you were alone," the man said unsteadily.

"Well, I'm not. What d'you want?"

"I—I was looking for Miss Celia."

"What do you want with Celia?" Parados demanded furiously.

The man flinched, but his eyes were defiant as he answered, "That's my affair."

He had got as far as the patio window when Parados, his voice a wicked drawl, stopped him.

"Annersley."

"Yes?"

"Shake hands with Mr. Hunt. This is Annersley, Hunt—one of my bright young men." The leer in his eyes angered me. "Hunt is to be with us for a day or two."

"Glad to know you, Hunt," Annersley said tonelessly. He did not extend his hand. "I hope you enjoy San Lucas." With this he backed out of the room.

Parados drummed on the writing table and I could still feel the heat of his fury. Suddenly, he stood up.

"You might as well see the stuff. This way."

He had turned a switch, flooding the room with light, and we were halfway towards the other door in the north wall when he stopped abruptly and I saw that he was staring intently at the glass case which had caught my attention a few minutes ago. I could not see his face, as I was behind him, but the muscles of his thick neck were standing out in cords and his hairy hands were knotted and white at the knuckles. He did not speak and I had the queer feeling that something inside of him was being torn up by the roots. Turning slowly, he looked at me over his shoulder, his skin the color of dirty water.

"Do you believe in luck, Hunt?" he muttered in a dry voice. "I mean Old Woman Luck," he went on huskily, as he saw my bewilderment. "Old Woman Luck with her eye open for a man. Luck symbolized—I guess that's the word—by a—a—something a man carries around with him."

"A talisman—is that what you mean?"

"That's it. A man's lucky piece."

"No," I said, "I'm not superstitious."

"Arrgh, you don't know what I'm talking about!" he exclaimed contemptuously. And then: "We'll leave that junk in there until to-morrow. It'll look better in the daylight. I'll have the housekeeper show you your room. Have you met Mrs. Parados yet?"

I had met her just after I arrived at the house and I told him so. He gave a humorless grimace, which I fully believed he had intended to be a grin of derision, and my bewilderment grew. Why he should have been so completely bowled over by the appearance of the glass case that he could not properly express the mockery my simple explanation for some unaccountable reason had aroused was more than I could fathom.

Parados jerked at a bell rope near the fireplace; then he put his hand on the back of a chair to steady himself. Neither of us spoke while we waited. Parados looked emotionally exhausted and ten years older. The maid who had admitted us, a smug-faced young woman with virtuous ankles, appeared at the hall door.

"Miss Jahries," Parados barked and the maid fled.

The housekeeper, a tall and somewhat angular woman with black hair and somber eyes fixed in a colorless but not unattractive face, presented herself immediately. There was a good bit of the tragic queen about Miss Jahries and I studied her with interest as Parados placed me in her care. She had that pent-up look I had noticed in Annersley; but while it was natural to Annersley, Miss Jahries had acquired it through suffering. Yes, it was suffering that I saw in her deep eyes, but she had schooled herself not to flinch.

"Miss Jahries," Parados called after us, as we were halfway up the handsome stair.

"Yes, Mr. Parados?"

"Is M. Flique in?"

"No, Mr. Parados."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Is there anything you do know?" Parados demanded vindictively. And then, with a leer at me: "Keep your eye on your cuff links, Hunt."

His contemptuous tone made the inference of his remark so brutally obvious that it was impossible to misunderstand what he meant, and I stared at Miss Jahries aghast. Her eyes closed for an instant, but she said nothing. My cheeks were burning as I glared down at Parados. If I could have resented the remark on Miss Jahries' behalf I should have felt better, but I knew that anything I might say would only make the incredible situation still worse. Parados' swarthy face had not yet

recovered its natural hue and as I continued to glare down into it the evidences of his peasant origin seemed to assert themselves and overwhelm the qualities that had lifted him up.

"Oh, Jahries!" he called again.

"Yes, Mr. Parados?"

"I shall not be in to dinner."

Parados turned and went into the library and shut the door.

II

THE KNIFE OF MADEMOISELLE

It was a pleasant room into which the housekeeper took me. Windows looked south and west. The south window, which was of the French type, was open, and I saw that it gave access to an oblong of flat roof. The library would be underneath, I thought.

"Life must be pleasant on San Lucas, Miss Jahries," I remarked.

It was an inane thing to say after what had happened on the stair, but I wanted to get the flavor of the scene out of my mouth and it was the first thing that came into my head.

"Do you think so, Mr. Hunt?" Miss Jahries answered, and the tremor in her voice made me turn my head away. "I'd give a good deal for a New England meadow and a singing stream."

"In winter?" I laughed uneasily.

Miss Jahries stared out of the open window. "There'd be spring to look forward to. We have dinner at eight, Mr. Hunt."

While I dressed I pondered over the several curious examples of human behavior that had come under my notice since I had entered the house, and I wondered if there might not be a connection of some sort between Parados' attitude towards Celia and Annersley's unexpected appearance, and Parados' panic when he looked at the glass case and his abominable treatment of Miss Jahries. And if there was, might not those singular incidents tie up with that sense of "wrongness" I had felt as soon as I had set foot on the island? The notion was

fantastic and it opened up all sorts of possibilities, but I did not go very far with it.

Seven o'clock found me with an hour or so on my hands. I had had only a word with Mrs. Parados and I suppose I ought to have gone downstairs, but I stepped to the open window instead. A strong wind was blowing and I slipped on the light overcoat I had brought with me.

The roof space, an oblong open on two sides, along which a low parapet ran, looked south and west. On the west side a stair descended to the cliff. There was no moon, but the night was as sharply beautiful as a black diamond. The racketing of the surf fretted a pattern out of the deeper-throated thundering of The Gut. Shrubbery whispered in the patio. Off shore were the lights of a steamer bound for San Diego or Lower California.

I knew something of the history of San Lucas Island and as I had used my eyes on the way up from the jetty I had a pretty good idea of my surroundings. The cove indented the southwest corner of the island. Parados had built his home on the north side of the cove; the ruin of the adobe fort Don Ramon Velasquez had built in the forties was on the south side. A light indicated the location of the fort tower, which I had noticed was in a fair state of preservation. Evidently it was occupied. By whom, I wondered.

The cove was a hundred yards or so wide; the light was perhaps twice that distance from where I stood. Unless The Gut was bridged—and I had seen no sign of a bridge—it would be necessary to walk around the head of The Gut, a considerable distance, no doubt, to get from the house to the fort. Parados had done his best to tame the savage beauty of this corner of the island and I easily visualized the red tiles of his hacienda burning, when the sun shone, in a setting of verdant lawn and cool patio like a ruby on a green plush pillow. But it was the lash

of the surf and the cannonading in The Gut and the shrouded savagery of the cliffs, not this created beauty, that gripped my senses, and to free myself of the insidious witchery of the hour I began to dig up what I knew of the history of the island.

The original estate had been granted to the father of Don Ramon by the King of Spain about the year eighteen ten. California was given away by the hundred square miles in those days. The grant, which was behind La Playa, ran north and south, and San Lucas Island had been thrown in with it. The Velasquezs had ruled their New World empire in the Old World manner, but more indulgently and open-handedly, and probably without a thought of their feudal state not continuing indefinitely. There is a romantic streak in me and I have always imagined I should have loved those happy indolent days with their gay fiestas and mission ceremonials, but Morrison tells me I'd choose our bathtub and paved street era quickly enough, if it came to the point.

The Velasquezs prospered until the eighteen forties when the Americans began to blow over the horizon. Don Ramon perceived what was happening and he built the adobe fort on San Lucas—the family had not occupied the island up to then—as a protest against the hated Yankee invasion. It was no more than the gesture of a gallant spirit, for he must have realized that a broadside from Commodore Stockton's *Congress* would have ground it to powder. Later on, he fought courageously with Pico.

When California came into the Union, Don Ramon withdrew in contempt to San Lucas Island and lived in the fort until his death. Don Carlos, his son, carried on in his place, and so did Don Miguel, his grandson, who died without heir in the nineties. Meanwhile, the mainland estate had been lost through a flaw in the crown

grant. After Don Miguel's death the island was sold for debt, but nothing was done with it until Parados bought it cheap around nineteen twelve.

I was pondering over the upsets of life when I happened to glance down at the cliffs below. There had been no one there a moment before. I was sure of that. At first, I did not know whether it was a man or a woman that I saw; and then, as the shadowy figure I was looking at moved into the veil of light in front of what I supposed was the west window of the library, I saw that it was the figure of a girl.

A thick hedge—of cypress probably—protected the patio from the edge of the cliff, a similar hedge protected the front lawn, but no hedge of any sort stood between the wall of the house and the edge of the cliff, and as the girl swayed uncertainly in the strong wind I was for a moment apprehensive for her safety. She drew closer to the window and peered into the room. Her movements were furtive.

"I wonder what she's after?" I muttered. I had a notion that she did not belong to the house.

Just then, she moved on and I lost her; but an instant later I caught sight of her again in front of a dimly lighted window beyond the library. She seemed to be trying the window and I remembered with quickening pulses that Parados had told me that the Brent collection was in the room beyond the library. Suddenly, the girl vanished and I concluded that she had entered the room. I ran quickly down the stair, passed the library window, the shades of which were drawn, and came to the second window. The shades of this window also were drawn, but they were not quite together and an inch or so of space down the center of the window, which was of the French type, gave me a partial view of the room beyond.

I did not see the girl. The Brent pottery was spread out upon a billiard table that stood in the center of the

library and several of the oils leaned against a section of the north wall that came within the limited range of my vision; but for the first time in my life I was more interested in warm flesh and blood than I was in old art and I touched one of the doors of the window. It opened noiselessly an inch or so, and I was trying to decide what I should do when the girl moved into the center of the room.

She was holding one of the oils and looking at it so intently that my eyes were drawn from the warm beauty of her face to the oil itself. I remembered it quite distinctly. The subject was the head and shoulders of an old lady with red-apple cheeks and a white lace collar and an indomitable air that would have made you look twice at her anywhere. Her blue eyes were smiling behind the misty look Seddons, the artist, had put into them.

As I looked at the girl again I made a discovery. She had a lovely mouth and deep blue eyes with changing lights and bronze hair beneath her small black felt hat. These attributes caused me an immense satisfaction, but it was the indomitable spirit in her face that excited me, for it was apparent where she had got it. And as I looked at the old lady again I knew where she had got her eyes and her mouth and, likely enough, her hair. Celia's honey-colored beauty was all very well, but blues and browns are more to my liking.

The girl suddenly became active. Putting the picture down, she opened a brown leather bag that hung from her arm, took out a small pearl-handled knife, drew one of its blades and, to my horror, plunged it through the canvas of the portrait, close to the frame. She was starting to rip the canvas out as I burst into the room.

"You mustn't do that!" I shouted. "That isn't your property. Give me that knife!"

She cried out in dismay as I seized her arm and she would have dropped the picture if I had not caught it in

time. A second or two of silence hung between us. Her face whitened and she held on to the side of the table. I felt pretty sick about it. She had taken hold of me in a way that I could not have explained even to myself. And then, to my relief, the indomitable look came back into her face.

"What are you going to do about it?"

She had a lovely contralto voice that cooled my anger. I withdrew the knife and laid the picture on the table.

"Where did you come from?" I inquired.

"Where did *you* come from?" she countered defiantly.

"You don't belong to the house, do you?"

"Do *you?*"

A suspicion of laughter in her eyes caused me to wonder if I was making a fool of myself and I was glad, in a way, when her lips trembled, for I knew then that the indomitable spirit of the old lady in the lace collar would not let her show how desperately afraid she was.

"You must have wanted it pretty badly," I said encouragingly.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Did you ever want anything very much?"

"Perhaps I shall one of these days."

I had not intended to say that, but a man cannot always stop the indiscretions that bubble up out of his subconscious when a pretty girl puts him off his guard. The intent way in which I was looking at her gave extra point to the speech and I thought she was going to be angry; instead, she smiled and all the warmth came back into her face.

"I wonder if you'll have the nerve to go and get it."

"I think so."

"Even if it isn't *exactly* yours?" she challenged me.

"If I wanted it badly enough—yes," and I deliberately looked into her eyes.

"I suppose you think I'm a thief?"

"As a rule," I said judicially, "a thief does not steal his grandmother's portrait."

"You think I am like her?" she demanded radiantly.

Screwing up my eye in my best professional manner, I compared her glowing face with that of the portrait.

"Let me see," I said critically. "Yes, there is a resemblance. A decided resemblance, in fact. The eyes are the same—yours will have that misty look one of these days. Your nose turns up a trifle more, but your mouths are identical—and all that mouths should be—"

"Oh, please!" she protested, laughing.

"But of course they are!" I insisted earnestly. "And that indomitable look."

"I admit the indomitable look. It was my stubbornness that made me do it."

"And now," I said gently, "you are going to tell me why you did it."

A door closed softly, then. I had not heard it open.

"Précisément!" a soprano voice said. "Mademoiselle is swift with her little knife. She has much to tell us."

III

LADY IN OILS

A LITTLE egg-shaped man with a bald pink head so smooth and luminous that I suspected him of polishing it —rightly, too, it turned out—was coming towards us from the library door, an expression of extravagant severity on his round pink face. He had an abundant blond mustache, and his sparkling china-blue eyes imparted an animated, indeed, a vivacious air to his somewhat unique combination of prosaic physical attributes. Parados, I recalled, had mentioned a M. Flique.

"No harm has been done to the picture," I said hastily.

"No harm was intended it," the little man said sternly. "Mademoiselle merely desired to remove it. She will explain, yes?"

It was clear that Mademoiselle was unequal to explaining anything just then and as I looked into her frightened eyes my sympathies were touched to an extent that was scarcely warranted by the circumstances under which I had found her.

"I'm sure it isn't as bad as it looks," I said with conviction. "If Miss—" Mademoiselle did not supply her name, continuing to stare apprehensively at the little blond man instead, and I addressed her directly. "You were going to tell me about it, weren't you? I am sure you have a pretty good reason for being here—for wanting that portrait, I mean. Perhaps we can help."

"Monsieur is generous," the little man chuckled. "It is not possible that you are that M. Morrison of whom M. Parados informed me, no?"

"I am Allan Hunt, the junior partner," I told him

curtly, for the girl had given me a grateful look. "Morrison is ill."

"I am astonish'l" he exclaimed, bowing. Picking up a lovely Ming vase flushed like a summer dawn, he regarded it whimsically. "Well, it is the day of youth and this is America! But, come!" and he put the vase down, his pink face extravagantly severe again. "Mademoiselle will explain?"

"I was going to take the portrait, of course," the girl said quietly. "You might as well tell Mr. Parados and get it over with."

"M. Parados—um," the little man muttered in a curious voice. "Monsieur has—how you say?—deputized me to act for him. "Mademoiselle will proceed, yes?"

"He would hardly do that," the girl said bitterly, echoing my own thought. She laughed unsteadily. "Anyhow, I am going to tell him that you have caught me."

She was moving towards the library door when the little man ran nimbly in front of her.

"Non, non," he commanded, holding up his plump white hands. "You will explain to Anatole Flique."

"And who is Anatole Flique?"

"Est-ce possible?" he exclaimed in astonishment. Then he twirled his mustache and gave her an indulgent smile. "Mademoiselle," said he, "France has her Richelieu, her Napoleon, and her Anatole Flique."

Mademoiselle smiled devastatingly, but it was my impression that he had not intended her to. Who was this absurd little man? I wondered. And if Parados was still in his library why didn't he come out? He must know we were here.

"We are waiting, mademoiselle," said Anatole Flique.

"I'd do it again!" Mademoiselle told him defiantly.

"What a spirit! And you came to the island for that portrait?"

"Of course."

"Incredible! What is she worth, *cette grande dame*, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"About five hundred dollars," I said.

Flique spread his hands. "And you—um—endanger your liberty for five hundred dollars! I cannot believe it! You must tell me why you desire that portrait, mademoiselle."

"It happens to be mine."

"*Mon Dieu*—that old lady! Come, now!"

"She was my grandmother," the girl said.

"What is your name?" Flique thundered.

Mademoiselle smiled devastatingly again. "Caroline Brent, monsieur," she said. "California has her climate, her Hollywood, and her Caroline Brent, you know."

I shouted with relief and exploded at her jibe in the same breath. Caroline Brent, indeed! What better moral right to the portrait could any one ask for? If she could dispose of Parados' legal right to it as easily she would stand completely vindicated. Flique meanwhile had whipped out a silk handkerchief and was polishing the top of his head. Emerging from this curious diversion beaming like a pink full moon, he seized the girl's hand. I thought he was going to embrace her.

"*'Cré nom de nom!*" he whispered. "To revere one's *grandmère* . . . in this profane age! You have the French blood, mademoiselle?" he demanded passionately.

"Not that I know of, M. Flique," Caroline Brent smiled.

"It must be so!" he declared vehemently, flinging out his arms. "Does one know of the indiscretions of one's ancestors? To revere one's *grandmère*—it is magnificent! Anatole Flique salutes you!"

Caroline smiled at me as M. Flique bent over her hand, but her eyes were tender and I was reminded of the misty look in the eyes of the portrait. The little man's face was grave when he lifted his head.

"I forget myself," he muttered apologetically. "It is the emotion. The *grandmère* is mademoiselle's, but not the portrait."

"The portrait, too," Caroline said.

"Eh?" The exclamation was sharp. "I do not comprehend."

"Parados will have told you something about us, I suppose," Caroline began. "The family has been in California for nearly eighty years—Great-grandfather John Brent was a forty-niner. He brought Grandmother Caroline with him from Boston, across the Isthmus, up the coast by sailing ship to San Francisco. It must have been a dreadful trip for a man with a little girl of ten. She remembered every detail of it up to the last week of her life. We were awfully proud of Grandmother Caroline.

"We were prosperous until the end of the Great War, but Father began to lose his grip about then. He adored John, my brother, and John was killed in the Argonne. It seemed to take something out of Father. Mr. Hunt will remember the W. P. Bank smash—we were in it. Father died last year. There was no one to take hold and everything had to go—the home—the pottery—the pictures. There was nothing left. I had a little money from Grandmother that they couldn't touch.

"I don't complain—you must understand that," Caroline's eyes sought mine and I nodded understandingly. "Our debts were just and they were paid. And I don't complain that Mr. Parados got the collection. It was for sale—he bought it—it is his. But the portrait of Grandmother Caroline was not a part of the Brent collection. It was mine. Father had it done for me because Grandmother and I were always so dear to each other. Unfortunately, I had no legal title to it—no paper in my own name, I mean—and the administrator insisted that it belonged to the Brent collection. He thought I might be

able to get it back from whoever bought the collection. I thought so, too. I never dreamed that Parados would not let me have it."

Caroline shut her eyes and the room became quiet. Flique, I felt, was watching her with an intentness that was sensed rather than seen. It worried me, that surreptitious inspection of his. There was something in the back of his pink head that neither Caroline nor I knew anything about and I wondered if she and her picture had been caught in that secret and perhaps sinister web which it was my impression Parados had spun around Celia and Annersley and Miss Jahries.

"You were saying, mademoiselle?" Flique inquired.

"I never believed the dreadful things everybody has heard about Parados," Caroline went on bitterly. "The Brent men were always so decent—I couldn't imagine the Parados sort. At least, not in the circle he is supposed to ornament. Mr. Hunt has valued the portrait at five hundred dollars. That was what I offered Parados for it, although I would have paid several times that amount to get it. You cannot imagine what Grandmother Caroline means to me. She is like a tradition. Father and John felt the same about her.

"I saw Parados in San Francisco. He wouldn't let me have the portrait at any figure. I told him what it meant to me—that it was really mine—that it shouldn't have been sold—and he laughed in my face. He did the same in Los Angeles. He wanted the picture, he said, and nothing under heaven could make him give up a thing he wanted. Oh, he was beastly! But I didn't give up hope—it means so much to me, that picture of Grandmother Caroline. So I came over here this afternoon. I caught his launch just as it was leaving La Playa at noon and I bribed the young man in charge of it to bring me over. I—I saw Parados again this afternoon."

Caroline dropped her eyes and the room became quiet

again. Her cheeks began to burn and the burn crept up to her hair and down to her neck and the blood began to thump in my temples. Anatole Flique twirled his mustache, a fierce look in his eyes.

"And still that *sâle chameau* would not give you your sainted *grandmère!*" he whispered.

Caroline flung up her head. "Everything I have heard about him is true!" she burst forth passionately. "He—he was familiar. I could have killed him. He—he put his hands on me. He said I could have the portrait—*conditionally!*"

The word released the pent-up indignation that had been accumulating in my breast ever since Caroline had begun her story and I should have gone plunging into the library if an uncanny insight had not shown Flique the inside of my mind.

"Monsieur," he said quietly, "you will leave this unfortunate affair to Anatole Flique."

It was the look in his eyes, not his tone or his words, that made me stop. His eyes were speaking to me in a language I did not understand. Something seemed to take me by the throat.

"Mademoiselle will finish," Flique murmured.

"There isn't much more," Caroline said wearily. "I suppose you will think me an idiot, but I could not reconcile myself to the thought of giving up Grandmother Caroline. I should have felt as if I had betrayed her. Oh, you cannot understand! How could you? I rushed out of his house wretched and furious and began to walk blindly up the slope to get myself under a eucalyptus tree and cried. The sun began to go down and all at once I remembered that the young boatman had promised to take me back when he went in for the mail late this afternoon.

"I hurried down, but he had gone. I didn't know what I was going to do and I didn't care much. Perhaps

he would smuggle me over later in the evening. I waited in the boat-house, but it became so dark and gloomy that I couldn't stand it any longer and I came up the cliff and sat on a ledge of rock for about an hour. You'll think I'm crazy, but all that time I felt that Grandmother Caroline was calling to me. The idea of—of taking the picture came to me. I couldn't fight it down. Parados had said the collection was in this room. Well, I came to the window. The room was lighted and the window was open. I just had to do it. And I'm not sorry. I'd do it again! And I don't care what Parados does to me!"

Caroline covered her face, but Flique gently removed her hands.

"Those blue eyes are too pretty for tears, mademoiselle," he said. And then, as she smiled forlornly, he puffed out his chest. "Come, now! You will put yourself in the hands of Anatole Flique?"

"Yes, monsieur," she said after considering him seriously for a moment.

"And you will be without fear?"

"I will try to be."

"With so magnificent a *grandmère* it cannot be otherwise!"

"You will tell Mr. Parados, of course?"

"When did you leave that boat-house, mademoiselle?" Flique inquired, ignoring the question.

"Perhaps ten minutes before Mr. Hunt found me."

"And you saw no one, yes?"

"No one, monsieur."

"And when was it you saw this Parados?"

"Between two and three."

"And not since then?"

"No."

Flique twirled his mustache and I was conscious again of that tight feeling in my throat. A multitude of ques-

tions were piling up inside me, but the tight feeling held them down.

"You will tell Mr. Parados, of course?" Caroline asked again.

"Ah, M. Parados. Have not you promised to put yourself in the hand of Anatole Flique?"

"Of course, but—"

"*Très bien!* Anatole Flique, then, shall ask his questions and give his answers as he desires. Is it not so? *Mais oui!* Presently we shall play a little game, but first—" he drew out an enormous gold watch. "*Mon Dieu,* it is a quarter of eight. Dinner will be served in fifteen minutes. It is an—how you say—inflexible rule of this remarkable house. Ah, these Americans! They live by the time clock. Madame Parados will welcome mademoiselle at her table. We shall dine, then play our little game."

"You expect me to have dinner here!" Caroline exclaimed in distress. "In this house? With Parados? At his table! Oh, I couldn't. Don't ask me that!"

"Haven't you promised?"

"Yes, yes, but don't make me do that!"

"Mademoiselle with the magnificent *grandmère* is afraid?"

"You don't understand. I *couldn't* sit at the same table with Parados—after what he said and did! I'd sooner go to jail."

"Look here, Flique," I interposed heatedly, "you are asking a good deal. You can't expect Miss Brent to meet Parados again. He ought to be horse-whipped and I've half a mind to do it!"

"Ah, that Parados!" Flique exclaimed, fluttering his hands. "He will not be at dinner, I assure you. And mademoiselle will be the friend of Anatole Flique. Can I say more?"

"But I haven't a suitable gown," Caroline protested tearfully. "And I don't know the other people. I haven't even met Mrs. Parados. She probably doesn't know I exist."

"I have said you are the friend of Anatole Flique," the little man declared. "That is enough. As for the gown —you shall see," and instantly he was twirling his mustache and beaming and twinkling again. "Mademoiselle Celia has a little georgette that is the color of your eyes."

"Why are you forcing me to do this?" Caroline wept.

"That's a reasonable question, M. Flique," I said, as calmly as I could. "You must realize Miss Brent's position. It isn't necessary for her to accept this humiliation. If we must tell Parados, let's tell him. I'll take it out of his hide if he threatens to do anything about it. If you don't want to tell him, let Miss Brent go. I'll be responsible for her and see that she gets home safely."

"Monsieur has the chivalry," Flique said, with a bow, "but he does not comprehend."

"I don't, but I'd like to. Why are you letting Miss Brent in for this?"

"Because I am her friend."

"Let her go, then."

His eyes spoke to me again, but I did not understand them.

"That would be the greatest unkindness, M. l'Antiquaire," he said gently. And then, to Caroline: "Mademoiselle would not have me compel her?"

Caroline looked at him piteously and I wanted to wring his pink neck.

"I will do what you ask," she said tonelessly.

"Bravo, ma cherie!" Flique exclaimed, bending low over Caroline's hand. "Did I not say you were the child of your *grandmère?* That *petite* georgette will bring the sparkle to your eyes. Come, we shall pay the respects to madame."

IV

THE GENIUS OF ANATOLE FLIQUE

Mrs. Parados, whom we met in the reception hall, had been a fine-looking woman in her day; but she was forty now, her figure had filled out a good deal, and her excessive use of cosmetics made it difficult to decide that her pronounced blondness was natural and not artificial. Experience and artifice had enameled her face with that hardness which a man carries better than a woman and I wondered if she had not cultivated it to mask her feelings. She gave me a smile, but her eyebrows ascended and Caroline turned imploringly to Flique.

"Madame is looking her best," Flique observed—diplomatically, for Mrs. Parados' eyes were tired—and he took Caroline by the hand as if he were presenting the Countess of Somebody to Marie Antoinette. "This is my charming friend, Mlle. Brent," he beamed. "May I beg a room for her and a place at your table?"

"Yes, indeed," the woman answered, and although her manner was not overcordial, she offered her hand—an unsteady hand I thought—to Caroline. "I must have been out when you arrived."

"Did I not meet her myself?" Flique interposed neatly, spreading his plump hands. "It is this way, madame. Mademoiselle Brent is of the illustrious Brents, of whom monsieur your husband has spoken. Monsieur called in those famous ones, Morrison and Hunt, and to assist them, to supply that detail of intimate knowledge, who is more—um—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?" and Flique snapped his fingers at me.

"Competent, perhaps," I ventured.

"Précisément," Flique beamed. "I ask you, madame, who is more competent than mademoiselle, the last of her line?"

This explanation had the virtue of originality and Anatole Flique offered it with his most engaging smile, but I wondered what Parados would say when he came out of his library. Mrs. Parados elevated her eyebrows again, but she nodded as if she understood.

"I didn't know my husband had sent for you, Miss Brent."

"Ah, that husband of yours," Flique chuckled, wagging a plump finger. "He is the original, yes. He is to do this and that—but instead he does thus and so. *N'ai-je pas raison.* Monsieur met mademoiselle in San Francisco."

Caroline's embarrassment was pitiable and I think it must have touched Mrs. Parados, for her hard face warmed a little.

"We are glad to have you with us, anyhow," she said. "Mr. Parados is tremendously interested in the Brent collection and I am sure you will be lots of use to Mr. Hunt."

"There's no one I'd rather have," I responded enthusiastically. It was about the only sincere word that had yet been spoken and Caroline gave me a grateful look. She was carrying the difficult situation off extremely well, I thought.

"You are very kind, Mrs. Parados," she said. "I hadn't expected to stay—but M. Flique insisted—"

"M. Flique has a way with him," Mrs. Parados remarked dryly.

A light footfall drew our eyes up the handsome staircase. Celia was descending slowly, astonishingly lovely in a scanty dinner gown the color of her hair. Her leisurely descent irritated me, and when I heard Mrs. Parados draw her breath in sharply I knew that the girl was playing for

effect. Mrs. Parados' hands were clenched and two red splotches burned in her white cheeks. The hatred in her eyes as she looked up at Celia shocked me. Celia was smiling.

It was a relief to rest my eyes on Caroline. Both were beautiful by any standard, but I preferred the staunch and tender loveliness of Caroline to the dangerous witchery of Celia. When you looked into Caroline's eyes you were sure of the spirit beyond; Celia's left you sure of nothing —except, perhaps, of the importance of Celia. I do not mean that the spirit was not there. It was just that Celia's hazel eyes were not a window.

Looking at Mrs. Parados again, I remember that she would be forty and that she was too plump and too much given to cosmetics and I thought I saw a little light. And then I recalled the fear I had seen in Celia's eyes when Parados had drawn her against his burly shoulder and I wondered if it was light.

"Who is this golden one that descends upon us poor mortals?" the soprano voice of Anatole Flique suddenly demanded. "Come, *ma cherie,*" and with a comical flourish he took Celia's hand and led her to Caroline. "I present my little friend, Mlle. Brent, who is to be with us a day or two if we are good to her. This golden one is our Celia Ferris, mademoiselle. Rarely is the eye of man so fortunate. Eh, M. l'Antiquaire? You will be friends, yes? It cannot be otherwise."

We were all laughing now, even Mrs. Parados, and I began to appreciate the peculiar genius of Anatole Flique.

"M. Flique is a dear and he says nothing so nicely that we love to listen," Celia said lightly. "I don't see why we shouldn't accept his opinion of each other."

"I could accept M. Flique's opinion of any one," Caroline laughed, her eyes the least bit derisive. "You are more than kind, you and Mrs. Parados—to take me into

your hearts like this. I didn't suppose even M. Flique could manage that. I know I shall love San Lucas."

"It's enchanting," Celia drawled. "Isn't it, Mrs. Parados?"

"You appear to find it so," Mrs. Parados said acidly.

"My little friend has the misfortune to be without the dinner gown," Flique interposed irrelevantly. "It is a serious matter, she assures me, and entirely the fault of that imbecile one, Anatole Flique. Come, my golden one. There is a little georgette the color of mademoiselle's eyes in your wardrobe—"

"Oh, surely," Celia interrupted. "Come along, Miss Brent. Blue doesn't suit me, but you'll be a dream in it. We've just five minutes."

Celia linked her arm in Caroline's and they flew up the handsome stair. Flique beamed after the flight of their silken heels, twirling his mustache.

"Incredible, this American youth," he muttered. And then, wagging his finger in my face: "If I were twenty years younger I would show you something, my friend. Anatole Flique cut the dash in his day, I can tell you!"

I wondered what kind of a dash he would cut when Parados came out of his den.

"You're too much of a diplomat for this house, M. Flique," Mrs. Parados said in a brittle voice.

She had moved towards a mahogany console table that stood against the wall near the foot of the stair. Her hand rested on it; rather heavily, I thought, for a cluster of Gold of Ophir roses in a silver bowl quivered as if she had moved the table slightly. The knuckles of the hand were white.

Anatole Flique bowed. "Madame is generous."

"It's too late for diplomacy," Mrs. Parados continued bitterly, her eyes all at once looking twice as old as her face. "You should have come ten years ago."

"It desolates me that you are right, madame," Flique

replied gravely. He looked at her intently, a little odd billikin of a man immoderately sobered. "To-day is madame's birthday," he said gently, "and the twentieth—um—anniversary of her wedding, yes?"

Mrs. Parados stared at him, her face tormented and terrified.

"May I felicitate madame?" Flique inquired.

"Oh, God!" Mrs. Parados groaned.

She stared at Flique with that awful nakedness in her face a moment longer, and then, with a sob, she turned and fled up the stair.

"Une femme curieuse," Flique muttered, polishing the top of his head. He linked his arm in mine, then: "Come, my friend, M. le Professeur is in the sun-room. We shall have a word with him before dinner."

The sun-room was on the south side of the drawing-room, through which we passed. It faced towards the cove and The Gut and looked into the patio. The Gut was quieter now, I noticed, and I supposed that the tide was falling.

"M. le Professeur," whom we found reading a newspaper, proved to be a slender, elderly man with brown eyes and thick-lensed glasses, a neat gray beard and a slightly nervous manner. Flique introduced him as Herbert Johns, the custodian of the fort. Professor Johns' nervousness vanished in the sudden warmth of the smile that illuminated his rather pinched face as effectively as if he had stepped into a sunbeam. I chastened the thought that his smile might be an assiduously cultivated one with the reflection that I knew a few crab-apples who might similarly cultivate their countenances with benefit to themselves and the rest of the world. Professor Johns would be a trifle absent-minded and rather prone to lose his glasses, I thought.

"Mr. Parados spoke of your coming," Professor Johns said agreeably, "but I expected an older man."

"It would be Morrison, the senior partner, of whom he spoke," I pointed out, a trifle tired of repeating the explanation. "Morrison was ill, so I came in his place."

Flique excused himself with the remark that he had "a composition to prepare" and took himself off to a Sheraton secretary at the other end of the sun-room.

"I am intensely interested in that old fort of yours," I laughed, dropping into a chair beside Professor Johns.

"Mine?" he murmured, lifting his eyebrows. "I wish it were."

An underlying bitterness penetrated the delicate surface wistfulness of his expression and I had a curious but very definite sense of incongruity.

"Of course it is Mr. Parados' property," I hastened to say, "but you have lived in it and taken care of it long enough to justify you in speaking of it as your own. I didn't mean in terms of investment."

"So it would seem, after twenty years," he agreed, drumming nervously on the arm of his chair. "But life itself is only a tenancy. Nothing is permanent—except death, and our silly dreams don't count then. But here I am talking nonsense," and his negative personality was suddenly steeped in his illuminating smile. "You must certainly come over as often as you please. The fort will interest you and we'll have some good talks. If you find me queer—loneliness treats my kind that way—you won't mind, eh?"

I was touched by a beaten look in his magnified eyes and I thought of him as being hounded by his perplexities. His eyes held mine for an instant against my will.

"People out of the common have a fascination for me," I laughed. "Look out I don't run you to death. You are busy?"

He nodded. "I'm working on a text book on marine biology. Are you interested in that sort of thing?"

"I am prepared to be."

His brown eyes sparkled. "The ocellas—that alleged sight organ of the lower forms, you know—is my field at present. I am especially interested in the medusa—the jellyfish. Stratford contends, and rightly, I believe, that sense impressions are conveyed from the ocellus to the ganglia. Radman takes an opposite view. I am consolidating Stratford's position."

"I'm afraid you'd find me a dull pupil," I grinned.

Professor Johns chuckled. "M. Flique said that of himself, but he is getting into it nicely."

"Flique is a remarkable man," I observed, lowering my voice.

"To be sure," Professor Johns agreed. "His high position would indicate that."

Flique was sealing an envelope I saw. He proceeded to address it.

"I don't think I heard what his position was," I murmured casually.

Professor Johns drummed on the arm of his chair. "I should have thought Mr. Parados would have told you," he said in surprise. "M. Flique is attached to the Paris Sureté. I understand that he is their cleverest investigator."

This significant bit of information left me with a cold feeling in the region of my heart. A little silver-toned gong gave tongue just then and I followed Professor Johns into the dining-room, pondering on what he had told me.

V

THE GAME CALLED "MURDER"

FLIQUE came hurrying into the room just as we had taken our places. He beamed on each one of us with scrupulous impartiality, then shook an indulgent finger at Caroline.

"Ah, the little georgette!" he exclaimed. "Did I not say it was made for mademoiselle? We are the favored ones to-night, M. l'Antiquaire," and tucking his napkin under his chin, he addressed himself to his turtle soup.

Celia had exercised her peculiar magic with stunning effect. Johns and I had encountered them in the hall and Caroline in scanty georgette and twinkling gold shoes and stockings, an elusive smile on her lips, had made me think of a little blue flame dancing on a censer. I did not attempt to put my admiration into words, for I never could pay a woman a compliment without making an ass of myself, but I imagine my eyes were pretty eloquent.

Mrs. Parados sat at the foot of the table. Celia was between Johns and me; Caroline and Annersley and Flique had the opposite side. The head of the table was vacant. We were served by the virtuous-looking maid who had admitted me to the house. Her name was Manning, it seemed. I surmised that most of the Parados retinue of servants was attached to the Beverly Hills home and that this source was drawn upon as occasion required.

Candle light and the glow from the eucalyptus logs crackling in the grate immersed the handsome paneled room in that rare warmth which is their peculiar quality; but that responsiveness they coax out of the human spirit as nothing else can was missing. It was like sitting at a

funeral breakfast. Flique, whom I had learned was the cleverest detective on the Paris Sureté, was the only one of us who appeared to be completely in command of himself. One could almost feel the air humming like taut wires in a wind.

I do not believe that I am more than normally curious, but I would have given a good deal to have known what the cleverest detective of the Paris Sureté was doing behind his cup of turtle soup. The situation bristled with fascinating possibilities and I had been letting my imagination run riot. None of my wild theories were even remotely near the fantastic truth, it turned out.

"An excellent soup, madame," Flique observed, wiping his mustache with his napkin.

"I have a good cook," Mrs. Parados admitted briefly.

"The admirable Lum We. A treasure indeed! You acquired him in California?"

"Mr. Parados brought him from Honolulu." Bitterness sharpened Mrs. Parados' voice as she added: "My husband usually engages the servants."

"Madame is saved a grave responsibility," Flique murmured.

"I don't wish to evade responsibility!"

The assertion burst in our faces like a ball of light, illuminating the black hatred in the woman's heart with appalling distinctness. It was gone in a flash and Mrs. Parados sat like a figure of stone. The room was unbearably quiet for a minute or so after that.

"Ah, responsibility," said Anatole Flique. "A tremendous word, that!" and he twirled his mustache. "M. Parados, now—was he—um—responsible for this Manning who serves us so nimbly?" Manning had just left the room.

Mrs. Parados laughed coldly. "No. Elsie is my personal maid. I usually bring her over for the weekends. She enjoys the trip and she doesn't mind the table work.

No, my husband isn't responsible for Elsie." Mrs. Parados was pointing her spears again and she turned to Celia. Her lips were smiling, but her eyes were hard and bright like glass. "He is responsible for Miss Ferris, of course," she drawled. "Isn't he, Celia?"

It was such a senseless thing to say, for she was hurting herself as much as she was Celia. Women seem to enjoy that curious form of martyrdom. Celia's cheeks began to burn and she dropped her eyes before the scorn in the other woman's face. I could feel Caroline's indignation; and then the sharp intake of breath drew my eyes to Annersley. He was plucking at a yellow rose, a Gold of Ophir rose, in the lapel of his coat. His lips were bloodless and I could not make up my mind whether it was fury or fear that predominated in his dark eyes. When he spoke, the calmness of his tone startled me.

"Miss Ferris is a capable secretary, Mrs. Parados," he said. "That was why Mr. Parados engaged her."

"Of course," Mrs. Parados admitted ironically. "Dan prides himself on his—" she paused and the glint in her eyes sharpened, "—on his good taste."

There was silence for a minute or so after that, but the woman's devil still rode her and she glanced casually at Caroline.

"I'm not sure who is responsible for Miss Brent," she said.

My blood began to boil and I glared indignantly at Flique, to whom Caroline was turning in panic; but Flique was engrossed in his fricassee chicken and avocado salad, apparently unaware of the situation he had precipitated—deliberately, I suspected.

"M. Flique is responsible for Miss Brent, Mrs. Parados," I said sharply.

"Does any one question the wisdom of Anatole Flique in this matter?" the little man inquired briskly, looking up with a dab of mayonnaise on his yellow mustache. "But

youth and beauty, madame—they are accountable to no one. In themselves they are sufficient. Is it not so?"

Mrs. Parados began to pick at her salad.

The fricassee and the salad were excellent, but the unpleasantness had taken the edge off my appetite. Flique, indeed, was the only one of us who was relishing his food, and it was he who had spoiled our appetites. I looked across at Caroline, but her eyes were fixed on her plate. A painful silence ensued. The booming in The Gut had dropped to a sullen rumble. I would have welcomed the ominous thundering of a couple of hours ago.

"We spoke of responsibility," Anatole Flique said, when he had put away the last of his chicken. "A pregnant word, that! And the dictionaries define it as so and so. But what are dictionary definitions, I ask you? To me responsibility is this, to madame it is that, to the rest of you—*le bon Dieu sait. J'ai raison, n'est-ce pas,* M. le Professeur?"

Johns nodded, lifting his eyes from his plate. "Words are dangerous tools."

"The destroyers of empires!" Anatole Flique continued vehemently, flourishing his hands. "Yet every man has his little interpretation, dictionaries to the—um—that word, M. le Antiquaire?" and Flique snapped his fingers at me.

"Contrary," I ventured, smiling.

"Précisément!" and Flique acknowledged my assistance with a bow. "Liberty, now," he proceeded. "A brave word, that, messieurs et mesdames, and beloved by *la belle France,* but to the Russian moujik, to the Italian Black Shirt, to the imbecile Englishman with his roast beef and ale, is its meaning the same?" He paused, a compelling expression in his eyes. "Is it the same, shall we say," and he shrugged negligently, "is it the same to le Balafré and Cicéron Bec?"

Dessert was served jus then—a zabaglione, the recipe

for which Lum We must have coaxed out of Olympus. Some bottles of Sauterne were opened and Manning poured the wine, disapproval in her eyes. Manning undoubtedly had sound views on the subject.

"Who are le Balafré and Cicéron Bec?" Mrs. Parados inquired, pronouncing the names awkwardly.

All of us wanted to know that, I supposed, but Anatole Flique was relishing his dessert and he made us wait until he had finished it.

"They were quite infamous criminals of France," he said, sipping his wine appreciatively. "Seven months ago they escaped from *l'Ile du Diable,* where France sends her bad little ones. She does not easily give up her children, that island, I can tell you. And they have not been caught." Flique surveyed us over the rim of his wineglass, his eyes as cold as marbles. "We spoke of liberty. To le Balafré, the Scarred One, and to Cicéron Bec, it must have been a madness—a madness eating into the brain."

I think it was apparent to every one of us by this that Flique had begun his discourse upon the relative values of words for no other purpose than to give himself an excuse for throwing those two names in our faces. The escape of two convicts from Devil's Island had been on the front page for several days shortly after it had happened. I recalled the affair, although I had not remembered the names of the poor wretches. They were sinister sounding names—le Balafré and Cicéron Bec—and Flique had uttered them—deliberately, no doubt,—with the effect of a cold wind let suddenly into a room. But what possible connection could there be between any one of our group, Flique alone excepted, and two fugitives from a French penal colony to whom "liberty was a madness eating into the brain?" That phrase of Flique's struck a responsive chord in my mind and I had a sharp sense of some shrouded horror creeping upon us. What was an

agent of the Paris Sureté doing at Dan Parados' table? I shuddered. It was all too fantastic for my brain.

"An excellent Sauterne, madame," Flique beamed, and he tipped his wineglass until the flame of a candle spilled blue-white fire into it. "But I do not understand. The wisdom of all time is yours, yet you deny yourselves the precious heritage of antiquity. But no, I am wrong," and he chuckled. "Does it not stand before me? Yours is the greater wisdom. It does not exist, but I drink it. That is magic indeed. *Un pays curieux, l'Amérique.*"

We sipped our wine and waited. I looked at Caroline and she gave me a troubled smile. Annersley probably got something of the sort from Celia. Professor Johns fiddled with his glasses. Mrs. Parados pushed back her zabaglione. I reached for my cigarettes. We were all waiting. For what, I doubt if any of us knew. But we were waiting. And I think most of us were afraid.

Anatole Flique put down his glass and wiped his mustache.

"Madame," he inquired with a bow, "have I your permission to propose a little diversion?"

Mrs. Parados nodded, but a trifle uneasily, I thought. "Do you mean some sort of a game?"

"Mais oui. I shall explain."

Flique took a tiny cigar out of an elaborately embossed leather case. While he was lighting it I offered my cigarettes to Celia who took one, and to Caroline, who declined. I was glad Caroline declined, although Morrison, who is a good deal of a cynic, assures me I am an old-fashioned idiot. Mrs. Parados was smoking already. Johns shook his head; so did Annersley, who had just found his own cigarettes and was nervously tapping one down.

"It is this way," Anatole Flique began. "Two months ago I came to that marvelous New York. I am met and I am fêted magnificently, as befits the principal agent of

la Sureté. There are dinners and speeches and parties, and always the cocktail. An incredible people, these Americans! Had they but the philosophy that is the gift of good wine. *Quel dommage!* In the home of one of those higherbrows on the Long Island we play a make-believe game. Sometimes I think it is all make-believe, this America. It is a new game that we are to play, my friends assure me, and it is a compliment to the principal agent of *la Sureté*. Name of a pipe! what a game that was," and Anatole Flique polished the top of his head.

"What was the game?" Mrs. Parados asked tersely.

"Madame, it has an evil name, but an apt one. That game is called Murder."

Flique threw the word into our faces as he had the names of the two French convicts a few minutes before, and I had again the peculiar feeling that a cold wind had blown into the room. My reaction was unjustified, as I was fairly familiar with the game to which Flique had referred, having played it once or twice in New York, where it had been fairly popular the previous spring. It was a good game—intelligently managed, a powerfully dramatic game—but I did not relish the thought of playing it at the present time, for I was quite sure that Flique had suggested it for reasons that had nothing whatever to do with the enjoyment we might get out of it.

"I know the game!" Caroline exclaimed. "It was played at a party I was invited to in San Francisco a few weeks ago."

"I ran into it in New York last spring," I told them.

"Bien!" Flique ejaculated, beaming. "But they told me, those clever ones, that it could not be played outside of New York. Well, we shall see. M. l'Antiquaire, will you have the goodness to describe that game? If we depart from the rules it does not matter. And if we create rules of our own, who will care?"

Flique, I decided, intended to make his own rules.

"The game is a good deal easier to explain than it is to play," I began, pinching out my cigarette. "It goes something like this: Half a dozen or more people are gathered in a room, as we are. One of the number volunteers to 'find' the 'dead body' of some person who is known to everybody in the group, but is not a member of it. The volunteer reports what he has 'found'; it is then assumed that one of the persons in the room committed the 'crime' and a member of the group is appointed detective or district attorney. The investigator questions the group in the good old way. Each one tries to exonerate himself and to involve one of his neighbors, who wriggles out as best he can—if he can—and tries to throw suspicion on some one else—his accuser, perhaps. The district attorney does all the questioning and the evidence submitted is assumed to be true. Finally, some one becomes so completely involved that he cannot clear himself, his guilt is established, and the game ends. It's corking fine entertainment, if it's done properly."

"And it shall be," Flique assured us a trifle grimly, I thought. "With the permission of madame?" and he bowed toward the foot of the table.

"Why not?" Mrs. Parados asked. "Who is to be the victim?"

"One whom we all know and who is not of our number. Madame, your husband."

"Oh, Dan!" Mrs. Parados laughed ironically. "He'd enjoy that, I'm sure. Well, send some one out to find him."

"It is not *nécessaire,* that, madame. It shall be, as you say, understood?"

"That we have found him already?"

"Mais oui."

"All right. You are the detective, I suppose?"

Anatole Flique twirled his mustache. "Unless there is another more competent than the principal agent of *la Sureté.*"

Mrs. Parados laughed. "If the rest of you are agreeable to playing this game, I commission M. Flique to discover who murdered my husband."

It was my impression that Mrs. Parados was rather keen about the game. I had been watching Annersley, too. His right hand lay clenched upon the table, as white as a lump of chalk; the fingers of his left were plucking at the yellow rose in the lapel of his coat. But when he spoke his voice had the flatness of a sheet of glass.

"Do you think we ought to do this, Mrs. Parados? You know how Mr. Parados feels about death. He will never even permit it to be discussed. It is the one thing he is afraid of. I'm quite sure he wouldn't want himself used in such a game."

I was of the same opinion, but Annersley should have known that opposition of that sort would have on Mrs. Parados the effect contrary to the one he desired.

"Dan will have to put up with it, then," she announced caustically. "He should have come in to dinner. It won't hurt him. How about the rest of you?"

Professor Johns had been polishing his glasses with his napkin.

"I haven't any personal objection to the game," he said, bridging his nose with the glasses, and twinkling his brown eyes at us. "It sounds interesting, in fact. But I believe Mr. Annersley is right. Mr. Parados has an abnormal horror of death. Most of us are aware of this, but I have known him for over twenty years and perhaps I understand this fundamental horror of his better than any one else, with the possible exception of Mrs. Parados. He is afraid of no man on earth, but he is afraid of death to an extent unequalled in any one I ever met. It seems to me that we should respect his feelings."

It was clear that Mrs. Parados did not intend to be overruled.

"When did Dan ever respect any one's feelings?" she demanded scornfully. "Does he respect yours? Mine? But aside from that, I have an idea Dan would have something to say to any one who said he was afraid of *anything*. How about you, Celia? Miss Brent? Mr. Hunt?"

We indicated our willingness and Flique rewarded us with a beaming smile. Annersley got up, his dapper figure rigid.

"I must ask you to excuse me, Mrs. Parados," he said stiffly. "How about you, Johns?"

"Dear me, it isn't that serious," the professor laughed. "I fancy I shall see it through. You'd better take a hand, or we'll be suspecting you of the murder."

"I don't think I shall excuse you, Mr. Annersley," Mrs. Parados said coldly.

"Be a sport, Claude," Celia drawled, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke at him. "It's only a game. Sit down."

"That's the point," he muttered huskily. "It's only a game! It isn't the sort of thing to make a game of."

But he sat down, for no man likes to be made a fool of by the girl he loves. I thought I caught a desperate look in his eyes, but whatever it was that I saw vanished in a flash and I could not be sure, although it intensified that disturbing mental condition that had been growing on me ever since I had set foot on the island. My sympathies went out to Annersley. There would be genuinely likeable qualities beneath that formal exterior. I wondered if Celia was really fond of him.

"We are ready, M. Flique," Mrs. Parados announced with a hard light in her eyes. "Why not begin with Mr. Annersley?"

VI

BETWEEN HALF-PAST SIX AND SEVEN

Anatole Flique sipped his wine, lingered for an instant over its fragrance, and put the glass down. His eyes held that impressively brilliant expression I had seen in them once or twice already.

"We shall assume, messieurs et mesdames, that I have just found the body of monsieur on the floor of his library. He is shot through the heart and he lies on his face just inside the patio window. And the patio window is closed. *Comprenez vous?* Monsieur has been dead some little while. How long, I do not know. Perhaps we shall discover. It is now—" Flique glanced at his enormous watch, "—nine o'clock."

My reaction to this was definitely one of horror. I almost wished I had refused to have anything to do with the game. And then I remembered that when the game was played seriously its stark realism usually produced such an effect as this upon those who took part in it. Caroline's eyes questioned mine, but I had no answer to give her.

"We shall also assume," Anatole Flique continued, "that Mlle. Jahries informed me when I came in this evening that monsieur desired me to come to the library. I knocked on the door. He did not answer. I announced my presence and he did not answer. Monsieur is the—um—autocrat and I would not enter without his invitation. I assume that he was dead. It was then seven o'clock."

Flique twirled his mustache and waited.

"He was alive at half-past six," I said, accepting the

cue. "I left him, then. Miss Jahries saw him, too."

"Bravo!" Flique glowed. "Monsieur was shot between half-past six and seven. We progress."

"I saw Mr. Annersley go into the library through the patio window shortly after half-past six," Mrs. Parados drawled.

Annersley whirled upon her, the tough fabric of his self-control ripping like silk.

"You did not!" he shouted in a sort of frenzy. "I haven't seen Mr. Parados since noon!"

"I must have been mistaken, then," Mrs. Parados said ironically. "I thought it was you."

"But you did see Mr. Parados early this evening, Annersley," I reminded him. "Towards half-past six, you remember. You came into the library with a newspaper in your hand while I was there. You said you were seeking Miss Ferris."

His eyes were desperate as he stared across the table at me. He shut them for a moment. When he opened them, the look was gone and he had patched the fabric of his self-control.

"That's right," he admitted calmly. "I did see him. I'd forgotten. But that was before half-past six. I did not see him after."

"Mr. Hunt said you were looking for *me,"* Celia teased him. Her laugh was strained, I thought. "How could you have forgotten?"

"Celia!" Annersley pleaded, and the pain in his eyes made me wish I had kept quiet. "You saw him after I did, Hunt," he charged, turning toward me. "How about that?"

"I saw him go back into the library at half-past six," I replied. "Miss Jahries was taking me up to my room. That was the last I saw of him. Anyhow, I had no motive for killing him."

"Do you mean that I have?" Annersley demanded, clenching his hands.

"Claude!" Celia protested, half rising.

"Yes."

It was Mrs. Parados who flung the word at Annersley. He took it as one does a blow in the face—wincing and with the lips drawn tight over the teeth.

"What do you mean by that, Mrs. Parados?" Annersley asked quietly.

"The Fleetwood Trading Company," Mrs. Parados told him. "Hasn't Dan swindled you out of your interest? I'm frank about my husband, you see." Mrs. Parados lit another cigarette.

"Is that motive enough for murdering him?"

"I think it might have been enough for me, if I had been a man," Mrs. Parados said, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

The tormented look that leaped into Annersley's eyes as Mrs. Parados drove him this double-edged thrust made it difficult to remember that we were playing a game and nothing more.

"This Fleetwood Trading Company, monsieur," Flique murmured, looking up from an envelope upon which he had been pencilling these past few minutes. "You will tell us about it, yes?"

Annersley pulled himself together and I wondered if he also was finding it difficult to remember that we were playing a game and nothing more. Mrs. Parados and Celia were staring at each other. The cold hatred in the older woman's eyes shocked me. I shuddered. Why, I did not know. I looked at Caroline. Her eyes were apprehensive, but they were sane and true, and they steadied me.

"The Fleetwood Trading Company is a land company Parados formed ten years ago," Annersley said tersely. "He got me into it—about everything I had. The com-

pany prospered up to a couple of months ago, when he took it into his head to ruin me. The directorate belongs to Parados and it voted our assets into another of his companies. Never mind the details. Everybody told me he was a devil! I'm out a hundred and fifty thousand—and broke!"

Annersley's lips were white and he was beating on the table with his fists as he hurled the last word at us. I think the utterance of it brought him a measure of emotional relief.

"A pretty good motive, don't you think, M. Flique?" Mrs. Parados asked.

As Flique lifted his head it struck me that an ominous inflexibility of expression was gradually emerging from the round pinkness of his face.

"And why did monsieur desire to ruin you?" he inquired briskly.

"Tell them the truth, Claude," Mrs. Parados taunted.

"Why don't *you* tell them the truth?" Celia demanded passionately. "About yourself and Dan Parados, I mean! You loathe him with all your soul. You have done so for years. And you've had reason to. He's a devil! And I don't care if he hears me! He's not fit to live! Motive! If any one has a motive for killing him, you have!"

"True enough," Mrs. Parados admitted coolly. "I hate Dan and he hates me. And we don't make any bones about telling each other so, either. But I wasn't fool enough to kill him. I knew some one else would do that for me. And some one else has." Mrs. Parados paused and the hatred in her eyes became predominant again. "But you managed to get on nicely with him, didn't you, dear?"

"You always were beastly to me!" Celia stormed with tears in her lovely eyes. "I detest him. You know I do!"

"But you managed to put up with him. I wonder why. Perhaps you have a little motive tucked away, too."

"How dare you?" Celia gasped.

"Oh, I'm not saying you did it, my dear. You are far too pretty to do anything so naughty. But we can't have a murder without motives, and the more motives we have the better the murder. M. Flique will agree with that."

"Madame is a woman of intelligence," Flique murmured, not looking up from his pencil and envelope.

The game seemed to have gotten completely out of the hands of its originator, who appeared only mildly interested in its progress. And yet, it was my feeling that what was being said was precisely what Anatole Flique wanted said, that his rôle was negative in appearance only, and that he was subtly directing us toward some pre-determined end. I shuddered again. And still I did not know why.

"If you want motives," Annersley rushed in hotly," leave Celia and me alone and look around a bit. Dan Parados is the most thoroughly detested man in California. His household is rotten with fear and hatred of him. He knows it and he delights in it. He feeds on the baser emotions as other men feed on love and trust and honor. Johns dislikes him—he's told me so. I've heard him—Parados—insult Miss Jahries abominably to her face. Last week he told Lum We in my hearing that he would break every bone in his body if Lum We brought any more of the stuff into the house. What stuff, I don't know He has a thousand enemies outside. And there's Miss Brent, there. I've an idea she's got something to say for herself."

At this, I joined Annersley in completely forgetting that we were playing a game.

"Miss Brent has got nothing to say for herself!" I retorted furiously. "She is here at the request of M. Flique for the reason he gave to Mrs. Parados. If that isn't enough for you, ask him."

This was not precisely the truth, but the distress that

had leaped into Caroline's eyes as Annersley brought her name into his tirade necessitated a definite statement and that was the only one possible.

"That's all rot!" Annersley shouted. "Miss Brent is down here for another reason. I happen to know something about that family portrait she wants back—"

"Are you intimating that Miss Brent killed Parados because of a picture, you ass!" I demanded.

"I am saying that she had a motive, like the rest of us," Annersley shot back. "We might as well air it—"

"Claude, Claude!" Celia cried angrily.

"I wouldn't mind knowing about it myself," Mrs. Parados interposed dryly. "Some of you seem to be more familiar with what's going on in this house than I am."

"Annersley," I said vehemently, "you are a swine! Miss Brent is not going to explain anything. If you think you can hide your own guilt—"

"Don't you say that to me," Annersley screamed, leaping onto his feet. "Take that back!"

If terror ever stared out of a man's eyes, it did out of his at that instant. Fortunately, Anatole Flique looked up just then, and I reminded myself that it was a game we were playing.

"M. le Professeur has the word to say for himself, I perceive," Flique announced.

The little man's soprano voice, its tone a trifle sharper, pricked the temporary balloon Annersley had made of himself and dropped him behind his fences again. Annersley looked desperately and, I thought, despairingly, from one to another of us. Celia turned up her nose at him, Caroline ignored him. He sat down abruptly, plucking at the yellow rose in the lapel of his coat.

Professor Johns nervously polished his glasses and we waited for him, all of us, with our faces cast in rigid lines. The room was cooler, the fire having burned down

to a heap of embers, and the shadows were longer. I had again the sharp sense of some shrouded horror creeping upon us.

"Really, I don't think I have much to say," Professor Johns murmured, glancing from one to another of us. "Mr. Parados and I were always fairly good friends. We knew each other a great many years and we had our disagreements. He humiliated me a good many times, but he always took that attitude toward those who served him or were associated with him in any way. I certainly never had any such motive as Mr. Annersley has attributed to me—"

"Oh, come, Professor," Mrs. Parados drawled. "Don't pretend that you and Dan are—were, I suppose I ought to say—a pair of cooing doves. We've all opened our hearts. You might as well tell us what you and he were so vehement about on the terrace the other night."

Professor Johns smiled wistfully. "He told you something about it, I imagine."

"Dan never told me anything!" Mrs. Parados said bitterly.

"We were discussing the fort," Professor Johns resumed. "Mr. Parados, it seemed, had worked out certain plans that would have destroyed its value as an historical landmark. I fear I became rather warm in defense of the integrity—yes, that is the word—of the fort. And Mr. Parados was more insulting than usual." Professor Johns smiled and his negative personality took on warmth and color. "That is all, monsieur. Scarcely a motive for murder, I imagine?"

Anatole Flique finished his wine. "You love it, that old fort, M. le Professeur?"

"I have lived in it for fifteen years," Johns answered simply. "I should say it was about half of my existence."

"And that other half?"

"My work."

"Monsieur is of the faithful ones," and Flique bowed. "And now," he continued briskly, twirling his mustache, "shall we—um—consider the clews? *Très bien.* There are two. First, a blackness on the blue Turkey carpet. A careless one with tar or oil on the sole of his shoe trod there. And second," Flique paused, his eyes considering each of us in turn. "And second, the price ticket clasped in the dead hand of monsieur."

The room became insupportably quiet. It was more like a tomb in which living people sat than anything else I could think of. All of us were staring at Flique, and at no one else; and Flique seemed to be looking at all of us, and into all of us, and through all of us, at once. A hammer was beating something into my brain. What, I did not know. Flique had said something about a price ticket . . . in monsieur's dead hand. That was going too far. After all, it was only a game. . . .

Mrs. Parados said suddenly:

"Come in, Miss Jahries."

Miss Jahries must have been standing to one side of the dining-room door, in the hall, for as we turned our heads, all of us, I imagined, immensely relieved by the interruption, she appeared in the doorway; and then, after a moment's hesitation, she stepped diffidently into the room. Her face was entirely without color and her clenched hands were held hard against her sides.

"How long have you been there, Miss Jahries?" Mrs. Parados wanted to know.

"Ten minutes," Miss Jahries answered.

"Did you shoot my husband?" Mrs. Parados asked.

The woman's body rocked. I thought she was going to fall, but she recovered herself. The suffering in her widening eyes could have encompassed the lives of half a dozen people.

"I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Parados," she said in a throaty voice.

"Oh, it's just a game we are playing," Mrs. Parados explained, with a hard laugh. "Tell Grainger to put some wood on the fire. It's getting cold."

As Miss Jahries disappeared, it was my impression that Annersley was the only one of us who had not looked at her.

"An interesting face," Flique murmured, as much to himself as to any one else. *"C'était beau jadis."*

"Miss Jahries is Dan's little mystery," Mrs. Parados remarked.

"Will madame explain?" Flique inquired.

"I wish I could. Dan keeps his secrets and so does Miss Jahries. She was cashier in one of his restaurants ten years ago. Then she came here as housekeeper. I don't know why. They hate each other. At least, they do now. Dan likes them young."

Mrs. Parados rested her eyes on Celia and I saw the color mount to the girl's cheeks. The older woman laughed. Annersley took out a cigarette. He must have tapped it down twenty times before he remembered himself and put it between his lips. The tormented look in his face sickened me of the whole beastly mess and I turned for relief to Caroline's indignant eyes. But it was only a game! Flique, who was still busy with his pencil, had said so. A game? Good God! the very air we breathed was poisoned!

The man, Grainger, came in just then. He was an elderly fellow with a fine white head and a bronze face in which strength and dignity and kindliness were deeply graven. His long arms hung low and forward from his heavy shoulders as if he had been built to grapple with stubborn bodies. Khaki would have become him better than the neat black suit he wore.

"Grainger," Mrs. Parados said, as he bent over the fireplace.

The man half turned, a log in his hand.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"What is that mark on your face?"

It was my impression that Grainger had hoped we would not notice the livid bruise that extended across his left cheek almost from the ear to the nostril. His color deepened, the bruise darkening angrily and giving a sinister cast to his face.

"A eucalyptus slashed me across the cheek, ma'am," he explained in a pent-up voice.

A sharp intake of breath on my left caused me to look at Celia. Her lips were pressed tightly together and her hands, which were below the table, were clenched hard upon her napkin.

"You'd better have it attended to," Mrs. Parados said. "Oh, Grainger?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You don't care a great deal for Mr. Parados, do you?"

Grainger lifted himself erect and faced us, the log still in his hand.

"Mr. Parados doesn't want people to like him, ma'am."

"And you don't?"

"No, ma'am. People mostly get what they want along that line."

"Was it you who shot him, Grainger?" Mrs. Parados asked casually.

The log dropped from Grainger's hand with a crash that concealed from the others the low cry that forced itself between Celia's clenched teeth. A little hush followed.

"Are you making game of me, ma'am?" Grainger asked quietly.

Mrs. Parados laughed. "It's just a little joke of M. Flique's, Grainger. Look to the fire."

"A man of character, that," Flique observed, when Grainger had gone. "Is he another of—um—monsieur's little mysteries?"

"I suppose he is, but he's a good gardener and I haven't anything against him. He dislikes Dan, but that's part of his job."

Anatole Flique tapped the table with his pencil. He seemed to be waiting. Now and then I had caught on his face the expression of one who listens. All of us were waiting, I think. Perhaps we knew what we were waiting for. I was not sure. The fire broke into a cackling blaze, but there was no heat in it. All I could feel was a cold horror that sat in the room like a human presence.

"Monsieur even won the hatred of that admirable Lum We," Flique muttered, and I think his perplexity was genuine. *C'est incroyable!"*

"Do you want Lum We in, too?" Mrs. Parados asked dryly.

"The creator of that magnificent soup!" Flique exclaimed aghast. *"Mon dieu, non!* It would be the supreme insult! Instead, M. Annersley—" Flique paused, the last trace of his beaming amiability receding into the round pinkness of his face, "instead—M. Annersley shall tell us where he was between half-past six and seven."

There was an instant of intolerable silence in the room; and then Annersley cleared his fences at a bound.

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" he shouted, leaping to his feet. "I'm through! Ask Mrs. Parados and Johns and Miss Brent and the servants what they were doing, if you like, but you won't ask me! That's more than I'll take from any man!"

"Claude!" Celia cried.

"I'll not stand it! By God, I won't! I'm through, I tell you. I'm going."

He broke away from the table and strode towards the hall door, while the rest of us, Flique excepted, stared after him with horror breaking in our faces. Flique had bounced out of his chair.

"You will remain, monsieur," he said quietly, and he placed his plump shoulders against the door, which Grainger had closed, just as Annersley reached for the handle.

"Get out of my way!" Annersley shouted violently. "I've had enough of your fool game! Get out of my way, I tell you!"

At that instant we heard a heavy pounding on an outer door. It brought every one of us onto our feet. Annersley fell back, his eyes wild and his lips white. I knew what it meant, that pounding, and I think the others did, too. My heart felt as if it were turning over.

"Who's that?" Mrs. Parados whispered.

"The police," said Anatole Flique.

The man's peculiar genius expanded before our eyes like a jinn come out of a lamp until it was the only aspect of his personality that we were aware of.

"Madame," Flique said gently, "it is not a game that we have played. Monsieur *was* shot through the heart between half-past six and seven this evening."

VII

THIRTY-FIVE CENTS

It sounds brutal, the way Flique had brought us to it, and yet, as I looked back upon that fantastic game and its ghastly climax, I do not see it in that light. Flique had uncovered a multitude of motives, as he had expected to, and Parados was so thoroughly detested by every member of the household that none of them, not even Mrs. Parados, was moved to the slightest expression of grief. His "little game" had thoroughly justified itself, I thought.

Some one was hurrying towards the front door.

"How long have you known about this?" Mrs. Parados demanded harshly.

"Since four minutes of seven, when I found him, madame," Flique said, bowing.

It was now half-past nine.

"Why didn't you tell us then?"

"I desired that the police should arrive first. It is better so on such unhappy occasions. I despatched your boatman with a letter. I am experienced in such matters," and Flique twirled his mustache.

"You appear to be!" Mrs. Parados retorted furiously. "It does not seem to have occurred to you that I am the mistress of this house. You lock the library door—yes, I tried it before dinner! You keep from me the knowledge of my husband's death—you send for the police without consulting me—you inveigle us into your idiotic game—"

"Madame," Flique interrupted, "I admit everything. As for my little game, it has told me many things I desired

to know. Unless we have motive we have nothing. But here are the police. Compose yourselves."

Three men strode into the room, Grainger and a young fellow whom I supposed ran the Parados launch hovering in the hall. A thin, wiry man slightly above the middle height was in the lead, and he, it was evident, was the one with whom we should have to reckon. His dark, shrewd, arrogant eyes, deeply set in a lean swarthy face, burned with an electric aliveness, a questing restlessness which I thought indicated a disposition to jump from extreme to extreme before the possibilities of a conclusion had been exhausted. The second man was of a different order. The impetus of his bulging shoulders, square, close-cropped head, thick underlip, and powerful arms would be irresistible once he got under way, which, however, he might not do until it was too late. They were a dangerous pair, I did not doubt. The third of the trio, a tall, elderly man with a neat ginger beard and a small black bag was obviously a physician.

"What's happened, Mrs. Parados?" the wiry man demanded. "We got a call from La Playa that Mr. Parados was shot. I'm Frank Samuels, a deputy district attorney."

"Ask M. Flique here," Mrs. Parados replied angrily. "*He* sent the message. He has just this minute informed me that my husband was murdered several hours ago!"

"Flique!" Samuels ejaculated, his restless eyes narrowing as he faced the little man. "Are you—"

"Anatole Flique, the principal agent of *la Sureté* of Paris," the little man bowed. "M. Samuel graced a luncheon in my honor at that magnificent Biltmore—"

"I thought I knew your face. Where's the body?"

"Come with me, M. le Deputy."

Flique pressed down the hall, fingering a key, the officers and the doctor close behind him. The rest of us were at their heels. Miss Jahries appeared, her white face startling in the dim hall light; then Manning and a bland Ori-

ental face that peered over her shoulder. Caroline was at my side. A ghastly silence muffled our footsteps.

The key rattled as Flique thrust it into the lock. Caroline's shoulder trembled against mine and I gripped her arm. Flique pushed on the door. It creaked a little. The room was in darkness. I wished it might remain so. A switch clicked and the darkness fled.

"He's dead—the master—" Manning was crying hysterically when Miss Jahries silenced her.

"Keep quiet!"

"Shove those women back, Kirk," Samuels muttered.

The doctor took off his overcoat.

Parados lay on his right side in front of the patio window, which was closed, as Flique had said. The hairy fingers of his right hand and the toes of his shoes were dug into the Turkey carpet, as if to the very last he had pitted himself against an obstacle, and his swarthy face expressed a passionate anger at the futility of this, his final effort. His left hand was clenched and held hard against his bulky chest. Even in death the man's enormous physical and mental vitality were impressed upon us.

Annersley, Johns, and I had already pushed well into the room. Kirk permitted Mrs. Parados to enter—I doubt if he could have stopped her—but the others he swept back into the doorway. The massed horror in their faces was another of the many pictures I carried away from that tragic house.

"Stay there," Kirk commanded. "We'll tell you when we want you. Don't leave the house, none of you."

Mrs. Parados looked at her husband with expressionless eyes. It was difficult to believe that springs of human feeling could have so completely dried up.

"So this is the end of you, Dan," she said quietly after a moment. "And we turned it into a game."

Annersley's lips were tight. I don't know what it was that I caught in his eyes, but it wasn't regret. I did not

blame him. Professor Johns shook his head and a little moisture gathered behind his thick-lensed glasses, but he was not deeply affected.

"You were so sure of yourself, Dan," he muttered.

That was my own feeling.

The doctor straightened out the body.

"Here's something," he said.

The doctor was holding up the left hand of the dead man. A common oblong price ticket with a cotton string dangled from it. I looked at Flique, a cold sensation around my heart. It had not occurred to me that we would actually *find* the price ticket he had introduced into his "little game." Some one in the doorway gasped and Flique, who was standing behind the doctor, looked around sharply; then he smiled reassuringly at me. Samuels removed the ticket and I noticed that some figures were written on it.

"Thirty-five cents," Samuels muttered.

The doctor began his examination, his swift white hands darting and poising like hummingbirds.

"A small sum to intrigue so rich a one in the moment of his death, M. le Deputy," Flique murmured.

Samuels did not answer at once and I knew that the overwhelming irony of that price ticket had got under his tough skin. A price ticket with 35c scrawled on it, and Parados had clutched it to his breast in the agony of death!

"Yes," he said, after a moment, "that hits me, too. There's nothing printed on it. We can't trace it. They make 'em by the billion. You found him, I understand?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"The body hasn't been touched?"

"To satisfy myself that he was dead—that is all."

"What time did you find him?"

"At precisely four minutes of seven."

"You are sure about the time?"

Anatole Flique twirled his mustache. "I am the principal agent of *la Sureté,* M. le Deputy."

Samuels grunted. "Have you any idea how long he had been dead when you found him?"

"Perhaps twenty minutes. M. Hunt, *ce jeune homme là,* left him in good cheer at half-past six. Is that not so, M. l'Antiquaire?"

I wasn't so sure about the good cheer, but I nodded.

"Mr. Parados and I were in this room until half-past six. I was with him for about an hour. We were discussing the Brent collection—the business that brought me down here. You'll find it in the billiard room over there. He called the housekeeper and had her take me up to my room. Mr. Parados came to the door of this room with us. That was the last I saw of him."

"Between six thirty and six fifty-six," Samuels muttered. "That pins it down pretty close. You did not inform Mrs. Parados of what happened until a few minutes ago, M. Flique?"

Flique shrugged. "Would you have desired me to?"

"I'm glad you didn't. You sent the young fellow that operates the launch off right away?"

"Not precisely, monsieur. It was a matter for—um—the deliberation. I did not wish to alarm madame and her friends. But monsieur is a man of intelligence?"

"I hope so," and the deputy bared his teeth in a sort of laugh. "That's all right. The room is just as it was, then?"

"Mais oui."

"Have you looked at the windows, Kirk?"

"The west window is bolted," Kirk answered in his heavy, toneless voice. He was examining the Chippendale writing table, presumably for fingerprints. "This window," indicating the one by the writing table, "and that one," pointing to the patio window, "are both latched, but neither of 'em is bolted. That door over there is locked,"

and he nodded towards the billiard room door. "There's no key in the lock. How about the telephone, ma'am?" he inquired of Mrs. Parados.

"It is part of the house system. We are not connected with the mainland."

"Telephone in every room?" Samuels asked.

"In most of the bedrooms, the kitchen, the boathouse, the fort, and Grainger's room over the garage."

Samuels nodded curtly and turned sharply towards Flique.

"What brought you in here at four minutes of seven?"

"I had been out. On my return mademoiselle the housekeeper informed me that monsieur desired my presence. But first I dressed for dinner, as you see. The door of the library was unlocked. I entered. Monsieur lay as you found him."

"And you came out by the same door, locking it behind you?"

"No, monsieur. I locked it, *oui,* but I—um—emerged by the billiard room."

"Why?"

Flique's eyes, as he faced the deputy, were tranquil, but I knew that he was disturbed and my apprehension on Caroline's account took a sudden bound. Parados had been murdered, and she had broken into his house a few minutes afterwards, determined to commit what Samuels would call a theft. And legally it *was* a theft, whatever it might be morally. Her eyes were seeking mine from the blur of faces in the doorway, but I dared not bring myself to meet them.

Flique shrugged his plump shoulders. "What does one look for when a murder has been committed? The Brent collection was in the billiard room and I went to see if it was—as you say—intact. And it was."

I breathed easier, but after all it was only a postponement of the inevitable.

"You found nothing—material here?"

Samuels' tone was significant. The expression of his dark eyes was even more so, and I thought of steel drills. If the simile was trite it was apt, for it was my belief that not even Flique could withhold anything from those arrogant eyes. My apprehension on Caroline's account quickened again. Flique's eyes still were tranquil as he answered:

"The price ticket, monsieur."

"Nothing else?"

Flique dropped his eyes to a dark stain on the carpet near the writing table. Samuels and Kirk did likewise. Bending suddenly, Samuels touched the stain with the tip of his finger.

"Oh," he said, straightening. "Well, that's not much."

His finger tip was darkened and I recalled that when Flique had spoken of the price ticket during the game he had also said something about an oil or tar stain he had found trodden into the library carpet.

Samuels now drew his arrogant eyes over the group, letting them rest for an instant on each one of us.

"A shot was fired in this room or from just outside it between half-past six and seven. Any of you hear it—anything that sounded like a shot?"

There was no reply.

"If any of you know anything about this business you'd better spill it," Samuels continued, a staccato quality in his tone that gave each word the impact of a bullet. "It'll be the better for you in the end."

It did not occur to me to doubt this. His eyes, as they rested on mine, gave me a pretty bad moment, for I was still thinking of Caroline. Mrs. Parados could give almost any interpretation she wished to Caroline's presence in this house. Her impassive countenance frightened me. Life had wrung her dry. She'd speak if she wanted to.

I managed to throw Caroline an encouraging look. We had Flique, at least.

"I heard no shot," I said, "and I was in the room above."

"Nor I," Mrs. Parados told him sharply.

"I was in the fort tower at the time," Professor Johns explained.

"I was on the front porch," Annersley stated abruptly. "I certainly heard no shot, nor anything that sounded like one."

The rest were equally positive in their denials and I wondered which of us was lying. More than one of us, perhaps. At any rate, a conviction that Parados had been shot by one of the group had taken root in my mind. As he received the last of our denials, Samuels muttered an imprecation—he was the type of man that goes through life muttering imprecations!—and his thin lips curled as his eyes passed appraisingly from one to another of us.

"Monsieur is frank," Flique murmured. "But does he believe we are in the bonds of secrecy? One or two, perhaps, but not six or eight. M. Hunt there had not even seen M. Parados before this evening. Come, my friend, you have assured me that you are a man of intelligence—"

"Intelligent enough to believe no more than I can prove," Samuels grunted disdainfully.

"You accept what the eye sees and no more—is that it?"

"Yes."

"But what of the eye within the eye?"

"I don't understand you."

"The imagination."

"Huh!" and the deputy bared his teeth again. "No, we don't put much stock in that sort of thing. It's the realities—the solid things—that count with us."

"*Parbleu,* but I have seen some solid lines, M. le

Deputy. And truth as fine as the spider's web. To assume that only the solid and the seen are the real: that, *mon ami,* is the grave error. Before the solid things are made the little pictures live in the mind. Life is a house of many doors and the little pictures in the inward eye are the keys that unlock them. But we diverge. Seriously, monsieur, you do not believe these people are in the conspiracy to lie to you?"

"Not exactly," Samuels said dryly. "A silencer may have been used."

"Could he have been killed with a rifle?" Annersley asked suddenly. "That also would account for us not hearing the shot."

"Flique said the patio window was shut," Samuels replied, "and the shades are drawn across the west window."

"The patio window may have been open and swung to," Professor Johns suggested. "There's quite a breeze. Mr. Parados' figure would have stood out against the light."

"I tried the window—both doors of it," Kirk said heavily, going on with his scrupulous inspection of the writing table. "They swing the other way."

"I suppose a pistol couldn't have been used with any degree of accuracy outside of hearing range?"

"No," Samuels grunted. "Besides, we've got to account for that price tag in Parados' hand. He must have grabbed it from the person who shot him. How about the bullet, Doc?"

"Against the left scapula, I think," the doctor answered casually. "It tore through the wall of the left ventricle. I imagine I can get it for you."

"Do you mind, Mrs. Parados?" Samuels queried.

"When a man's dead he's dead," Mrs. Parados answered.

Even Samuels tightened his lips at that. I suppose you

cannot expect a woman who hated as Mrs. Parados did to abide by any code but her own.

Samuels began to write in a notebook. I watched him for a moment, fascinated by the nervous energy of his fingers; then I looked from one to another of the group. The doctor at his grisly work, Flique looking like a saddened billikin and polishing the top of his head, Annersley with his fences up again, Johns staring at the body on the floor and fiddling with his glasses, his face drawn with horror. And Caroline . . . it was Caroline's eyes that drew me and Caroline's face that stood out in the blur of faces framed by the door.

"All of you seem to have forgotten The Gut," Mrs. Parados said abruptly.

"What about it?" Samuels demanded.

"To-night's and to-morrow night's tides are two of the highest of the season," Mrs. Parados explained impassively. "They are over seven feet. When the tide is high there is always a terrific noise in The Gut, and when it's unusually high, as it was to-night, the uproar is deafening. The tide was high at 6:45. Dan was shot about that time. The noise in The Gut might have drowned the sound of the shot."

"That's reasonable," Annersley said.

"Extremely so, I should say," Professor Johns added.

"Well, I don't know so much about that," I put in. "The Gut made a terrific row while I was in here with Mr. Parados, and the noise probably increased a little after I went upstairs, but as I said, I was in the room above, and I think I should have heard the shot had the pistol been fired without a silencer, in spite of The Gut."

"Précisément!" Flique said. "You see, messieurs, the report of a pistol is—um—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?" and Flique snapped his fingers at me.

"Penetrating?" I ventured.

"I thank you, *mon ami,*" and he gave me his beaming smile. "But the voice of The Gut—it rolls as the thunder. A shot in this room or just outside the window—would it not pierce as the little boy's whistle?"

Samuels nodded. "Probably. We'll test it out at high tide to-morrow night. It's my opinion a silencer was used. Got the bullet, Doc?"

"Yes. A forty-five, isn't it?" and the doctor handed Samuels the steel-jacketed projectile he had just retrieved.

"Colt automatic forty-five with a silencer attachment," Samuels grunted, turning the bullet over to Kirk. "Well, we know what to look for. Better let Flique see it. It's in his line."

The deputy's tone had an edge, but Flique turned it with the beaming amiability of his smile. He did not appear interested in the bullet, which he returned to Kirk.

"These silencers, monsieur—they are not easy to get?"

"Not easy, no," Samuels admitted, "but they can be got."

"And the possession of one of them, M. le Deputy—what would that suggest? You see, I have the ignorance."

"A crook—the underworld, as a rule. But it doesn't follow that some one of a different type—some one with a grudge against Parados, for instance—might not have got hold of a silencer. From what I know of Parados—" He paused and looked at Mrs. Parados. "Your husband was pretty well known and—"

"Pretty well hated," Mrs. Parados said calmly. "Never mind my feelings, Mr. Samuels. I haven't any left. Yes, I'd look into the revenge motive, if I were you. The Brent collection hasn't been touched and the safe hasn't been broken into. There wouldn't be much in the safe anyhow. Dan had a host of enemies and they are well distributed. Men he had broken—women he had finished with—but you know his reputation."

Samuels nodded. "That brings me back to you people here," and he included every one of us in a sweeping stare. "I'm giving it to you straight from the shoulder. This is just as likely—likelier, perhaps—to be an inside as an outside job. I'm here to get the truth and I'm not missing any bets." He paused significantly. I shall want to know what each one of you was doing between half-past six and seven. If any of you have got anything on your minds, you'd better get ready to throw it off."

The room seemed to grow perceptibly colder as Samuels said this. We were all one group now, those who had been at the door having pushed into the room. Mrs. Parados looked like a woman of ice, Caroline's eyes were enormous in the drained whiteness of her face, Celia pretended an indifference she obviously did not feel, Miss Jahries looked like a doomed queen in a tragedy, and Grainger's fine head was up, the bruise on his cheek challenging the eye. The doctor drew a rug over the body.

"Mr. Parados owned all of San Lucas, didn't he?" Samuels asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Parados answered.

"Any one else live on the island?"

"No."

"What about the little fishing village on the east side?"

"It's abandoned. A few Portuguese lived there when Dan bought the island, but he chased them away. There's no one there now, so far as I know."

"Have you seen any strangers around—on the island, or on small craft standing close inshore?"

"Yes."

"When? Who was it?"

A little vindictive flame played again upon the blue iciness of Mrs. Parados as she flung out her hand.

"That girl there—Miss Brent!"

VIII

CAROLINE HOLDS HER HEAD UP

A WOMAN who has nursed a grievance too long easily reverts to the primitive and I should have known it would come like that. Caroline shrank back as if Mrs. Parados had drawn a lash across her face. The blood rushed to my temples.

"You've no right to take that attitude, Mrs. Parados!" I protested hotly. "M. Flique is responsible for Miss Brent's presence here. You know that as well as I do."

Mrs. Parados had a point of view, perhaps, but I was not disposed to consider it just then. I looked at Flique instead. My anger did not blind me to the certainty that Flique could not have permitted Caroline to leave the island, nor did I see how the circumstances under which he had found her could be withheld from Samuels; but he had presented her to the household in a false light and Mrs. Parados was determined to reveal it as such, and my eyes were asking him what he proposed to do about it.

"What's all this?" Samuels demanded. "Miss Brent, did you say?"

Caroline flung a panic-stricken look at Flique.

"Courage, mademoiselle," he beamed. "Our little fiction is at an end—*c'est tout.* M. le Deputy is a man of intelligence. He will embrace the truth."

Caroline threw up her head and came forward, a little blue flame in her eyes. I got her a chair which she took with a look that sent the blood to my temples again. It was to be distinctly her battle, but I was going to see her through it and I remained by the side of the chair. Sam-

uels perched on the corner of the writing table and appraised her with his stormy eyes.

"Mrs. Parados has inferred that you have no business here, Miss Brent," he said curtly, "and M. Flique has suggested that you tell the truth. M. Flique's advice is good—better follow it! Who are you? Where did you come from? What are you doing here?"

Caroline flinched, but she kept her head up and told her story. It was essentially the story Flique and I had heard in the billiard room, but she told it with an excited breathlessness, with an incisive bite in her short, headlong sentences that made it doubly impressive, I thought. Truth was in her eyes, in the ring of her voice, in the flash of her slender hands. Even Samuels must see that. He heard her through in silence.

"The portrait was Parados', wasn't it?" Samuels demanded sharply.

"He'd paid for it, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I do mean. Didn't it make it his?"

Caroline eyed Samuels coolly up and down. "A gentleman wouldn't think so," she said casually. "There are different codes, of course."

Samuels bit irritably into the cigar he had just lighted.

"Parados wasn't your idea of a gentleman, huh?" he demanded.

"Was he yours?"

Caroline was holding her own, I thought.

"Parados didn't exactly turn you down this afternoon?"

Color flooded Caroline's white face. "I said there were 'conditions,'" she replied, a little contemptuously. "Do you wish me to name them? Mrs. Parados will understand, I am sure."

Mrs. Parados did, it appeared. Her expression for a moment was pretty awful; then her cultivated impassivity enameled over the break Caroline had made.

Samuels contemplated the end of his cigar. "I'm sorry

about that, Miss Brent," and the sincerity of his tone surprised me. "About the 'conditions,' I mean." He paused, frowning. "So you thought you'd better come and get the picture?"

"It seemed the decent thing to do," Caroline answered seriously. "If you'd had a Grandmother Brent you wouldn't have wanted to leave her with a—person like that, would you, Mr. Samuels?"

The deputy evidently did not relish Caroline's liking for answering one question by asking another, for he hooded his eyes and, in accordance with the sleuth tradition, proceeded to screen his face with a cloud of smoke. I have never been able to make up my mind whether the detectives of fiction are patterned after the detectives of fact, or the detectives of fact pattern themselves after the detectives of fiction. Samuels' eyes gradually defined themselves again.

"Miss Brent," he inquired abruptly, "exactly where were you between half-past six and seven?"

It was the inevitable question, but it took me off my guard and I think I should have made an exhibition of myself if Flique's plump hand, astonishingly powerful, had not closed upon my wrist.

"Compose yourself, *mon ami,*" he counseled quietly. "It is onpleasant, but *nécessaire*. Mademoiselle is in command of herself, you see."

Caroline's shoulder was trembling against my hand, which was on the back of her chair, and I wasn't so sure of this, but Flique's advice was sound and I kept quiet.

"Do you suspect me of killing Mr. Parados?" Caroline asked, amazement dominating every other emotion in her voice.

"Let's put it differently, Miss Brent," Samuels said, scratching his lean jaw. "A girl—not you; any girl—comes to a man about a matter of business. She's in the right, but he holds the cards. It happens that he is a rake

and he tells the girl she may have what she wants—on conditions. The girl shoots him. She is arrested. The public gets the facts and shouts, 'Serves him right!' The girl goes on trial, but the prosecution hasn't one chance in a hundred of getting a conviction. Likely enough the girl'll get a movie contract. See the point?"

"I don't want a movie contract, Mr. Samuels."

It was the very last sort of thing I had expected her to say, and it slid off the top of her mind with a semi-hysterical lightness that illuminated the unutterable horror Samuels' analogy had aroused in her breast. Samuels was impressed.

"Look here, Samuels," I broke in vehemently. "If Miss Brent had killed Parados wouldn't she have gone through that door," pointing towards the billiard room door, "instead of going round through the patio to the side window, as you leave us to infer you assume she did?"

"That door was locked, M. l'Antiquaire," Flique said gently. "Mademoiselle could not have used it."

"How did you open it, then?"

"My eyes had seen monsieur put the key in his trouser pocket," Flique informed me.

His eyes were reproving and Samuels' were sardonic and I was furious at myself for uncovering this piece of evidence against Caroline, and ashamed of myself, too. The sharp pressure of Caroline's shoulder against my hand comforted me. It seemed to tell me that she understood I had intended to help her.

"If Parados kept the billiard room locked, what was the window doing open?" Samuels wanted to know.

"Dan probably opened it," Mrs. Parados explained. "It's a west room and it gets pretty warm in the late afternoon, even in the winter. Dan never could stand heat."

Samuels addressed himself to Caroline again.

"I do not accuse you of killing Parados, Miss Brent," he said forcefully, "but if you did kill him," pausing impressively, "you had better come through. I'll get at the truth, anyhow. You've got a strong motive. Come through now and you'll get an acquittal. If you put me off and make us drag it out of you, your lawyer'll have to scrap for it."

"Is that your conception of American justice?" Professor Johns demanded indignantly.

"I guess it is," Samuels nodded. "Ours is a dirty job and we do it the best way we can. How about it, Miss Brent?"

Caroline breathed deeply and I wished I could see into her eyes.

"I did not kill Mr. Parados," she said in a tense voice.

"Fine!" Samuels exclaimed in the tone of one who accepts a challenge. "Now answer that question I asked you. Where were you between six-thirty and seven this evening?"

"I was in the boathouse waiting for the young man who runs the launch,—Mr. Hendricks, isn't it?—between half-past five and six," Caroline replied steadily. "I thought he might be willing to take me back to La Playa later on in the evening. But it began to get dark around six and I climbed up the cliff and sat on a ledge of rock overlooking the sea for about an hour. This ledge is behind the patio. It was there that the idea of making a last attempt to get possession of the portrait came to me. It took me a long time to work up my courage. But I am glad I tried."

"Did you see anybody while you were sitting there?"

"No."

Samuels nodded. "That's all. You are to remain on the island until I give you permission to leave."

"Mrs. Parados will have to try and put up with me, then," Caroline said lightly.

Mrs. Parados allowed this to pass. Flique had a word to say, it seemed.

"M. le Deputy?"

"Yes?"

"You suspect mademoiselle?"

"I do. She had motive and opportunity."

"*C'est vrai.* But the pistol from which that bullet was discharge'—a forty-five, is it not?—and that admirable invention—what is it, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"The silencer."

"*Précisément!* Does one associate such—um—indelicate instruments with the hands of mademoiselle?"

"I admit it isn't the sort of gun you'd expect her to use," Samuels returned irritably, "and I don't know where she got it, if it was she that did use it, but it happens to be the weapon that did the trick. What kind of a handbag did you bring with you, Miss Brent?"

"Quite a large one," Caroline told him disdainfully. "Large enough to hide your pistol in, even. You'll find the bag up in Miss Ferris's room."

"You Frenchmen are all the same, Flique," Samuels grinned. "It takes more than a pretty face to fool hombres like Kirk and me. We are as tough as cowhide."

"An incredible people, you Americans," Flique informed him gravely. "Had you adopted the tongue of my France instead of that imbecile English you would have possessed the earth. *Quel dommage!*"

"We are a hard-headed bunch with a liking for facts—that's all, Flique. 'Get the facts'—sabe?"

Flique bowed. "A philosophy in three words, monsieur. I thank you. But that pistol and its silencer—mightn't they have been in the possession of M. Parados himself?"

"And used by the killer against him? I thought of that, but none of these people have said anything about

seeing such a weapon in his possession. How about it, Mrs. Parados—the rest of you, too?"

"Dan had a pistol somewhere in his desk," Mrs. Parados answered, "but I think it's a thirty-eight. I never saw a silencer in my life. Of course, Dan may have had one, and a forty-five, too, without my knowledge. He had—and did—many things that I knew nothing of."

The others had nothing to add to this.

"But he may have had such an outfit, nevertheless," Samuels conceded.

"And if he had, how did Miss Brent get hold of it?" I demanded forcefully.

"God knows," and Samuels shrugged. "He may have had it out on his desk."

"M. le Deputy," Flique interposed diplomatically, "I shall implore a favor."

"Yes?"

"I am the principal agent of *la Sureté,* but what is that? This is America—your *méthode* is different. Monsieur, I would sit at your feet in the conduct of this tragic affair."

"You think the district attorney's office can't handle it alone?" Samuels demanded, in a slightly incredulous voice. "Is that what you mean?"

"Name of a dog!" Flique exclaimed, flinging out his plump hands. "Have I not said it is to sit at your feet? To learn your *système?* I would enrich *la Sureté* with my experience! And if I should contribute an—um—insignificance to the solution of this curious affair, what of it? The glory would be monsieur's," and Flique bowed humbly.

Samuels studied Flique's agitated face suspiciously for a moment.

"All right," he said abruptly. "You are welcome to pick up what you can. By the way, Flique, what are you doing here?"

Flique twirled his mustache. "That, my friend, shall be part of my little contribution. But afterwards, yes?"

Samuels nodded curtly. Taking out his notebook and pencil, he addressed himself to the group.

"I want to know the whereabouts of you people between half-past six and seven. Mrs. Parados."

IX

THE YELLOW PETAL

CAROLINE offered Mrs. Parados her chair, but she ignored it. Her eyes rested on her husband's covered body for an instant; then she lifted them to Samuels' appraising stare, the enameled impassivity of her expression unmoved.

"I was in my room dressing for dinner," she explained coldly. "Manning was with me, so that accounts for both of us."

"That right, Manning?"

"Indeed it is, sir!" Manning's voice threatened to become hysterical. "And what with preparing my mistress's bath and laying out her gown and doing some sewing I was busy every minute of the time. You *must* believe me, sir!" and Manning clasped her hands imploringly. "The master wouldn't look at me, but I'd nothing but kind thoughts for him. I've nothing but kind thoughts for everybody—"

"All right, Manning. You next," and the restless eyes appraised Miss Jahries. "Name?"

"Anita Jahries, housekeeper."

I had been struck by the peculiar deadness of Miss Jahries' voice from first hearing it, but it was my impression now that it would become vibrant and alive if Miss Jahries willed that it should. Her deeply luminous black eyes cast a faint glow upon her pale and tragic face.

"Where were you between half-past six and seven?"

"In my room resting. I always rest for a little while at that hour."

"Any one with you?"

"No." Miss Jahries seemed to be gathering herself together, and I had an odd sense of suspense. "Mr. Annersley was sitting on the north terrace. My room is downstairs, you see—just across the hall—and it looks out upon the north terrace."

"Did he know you were in your room?"

"Yes." Miss Jahries hesitated again. "He spoke to me through the window. The window was open and he was smoking. I coughed and he asked me if the smoke bothered me. Mr. Annersley is always considerate."

"You were in your room until seven?"

"Until about five minutes to."

"And Mr. Annersley was on the porch all of that time?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, the smoke from his cigar blew through my window and I heard him move from time to time."

"That is so, Samuels," Annersley broke in. "I heard Miss Jahries cough once or twice."

"Did you actually see her?"

"I don't peep into women's bedrooms," Annersley said dryly. "Miss Jahries answered me when I spoke about the smoke."

Samuels frowned at the tip of his cigar.

"Miss Jahries, what did you do after you had taken Mr. Hunt up to his room?"

"That would be about six o'clock," Miss Jahries said reflectively. "Between then and six-thirty, I suppose you mean? I helped Lum We with the salads, and arranged some flowers in the dining-room. And I gave M. Flique Mr. Parados' message."

"All right," Samuels grunted. "You next," and he looked at Grainger. "Name?"

"David Grainger. I'm the gardener and odd job man."

There was something of Rodin's art in the graven dignity of Grainger's bronze face and his voice had a

vibrant warmth that I liked. A look of distance in his clear gray eyes made me wonder if he really saw us. There was something familiar about his eyes, too—a quality of expression, not their color. I couldn't make out what it was.

"Well, what were you doing between half-past six and seven?"

"Having my supper in the kitchen."

"Were you alone?"

"No. Lum We was working over his dinner."

"Hmn." The deputy bared his teeth. "You people seem to run in pairs. Were you in the kitchen all of that half hour?"

"Yes."

"Lum We, too?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been employed here?"

Flique, I had noticed, was looking at Celia. And Celia was staring at Grainger, a feverish expression in her eyes.

"A matter of two years," Grainger muttered.

"Ever hear or see anything that might hook up with this shooting?"

"I 'tend my own business and leave other folks to 'tend theirs." Grainger's eyes had come out of the distance. "That's enough for any man."

"Answer my question!" Samuels commanded.

"That's all the answer you'll get," and Grainger thrust out a stubborn chin.

"How'd you come by that bruise on your face?"

The bruise became a little more livid. "A eucalyptus slashed me across the cheek," Grainger said.

Except that his voice was steady this time, his explanation was a replica of the one he had made in the dining-room.

"All right, Grainger. You next, Lum We," and Samuels beckoned to the little Oriental, who came shuffling

forward, all bland and smiling countenance and spotless white apron. "Speakum easy English, you? Sabe all I say? Mebbe ketchum Chinaboy talkee you to-morrow?"

Lum We bowed politely. "That would be a superfluity, Mr. Samuel. Your exquisite tongue is a dragon with fire in his nostril, but I have slain him. It is a garden of strange perfume and it lurks behind a locked door, but I hourly bask in it. It is a jeweled book with uncut pages of fine gold, but I have made its wisdom my treasure."

A ripple of amusement ran through the group. Even Mrs. Parados' impassivity was broken and it took her a moment or so to enamel it over again.

"Nom d'une pipe!" Flique murmured ecstatically. "Now I comprehend that remarkable soup."

"You heard what Grainger said, Lum We?" Samuels demanded, straightening his face.

"I have the ears of an eagle, Mr. Samuel. Mr. Glainger sheds the beam of his countenance upon me alway at those time."

"For his dinner?"

"Oh, certainly."

"And you were there all the time?"

"It is inevitable."

"He was, too?"

"Likewise so."

"How long have you been here, Lum We?"

"A small eternity, Mr. Samuel."

"Put it in years."

Lum We was distressed. "What is time? Seven years—eleven years—thirteen years. Who can decide?"

"About nine years," Mrs. Parados said. "Lum We has a poor memory."

"You liked your master?" Samuels continued.

"Mr. Parados was the apple of my eye," Lum We said imperturbably.

But a slight hesitation had preceded this virtuous reply and it was my impression that Lum We's Oriental blandness had faltered for an instant. Samuels regarded him silently and I wondered if he had sensed it, too.

"That's all just now, Lum We," Samuels said abruptly, and he turned to Professor Johns with an ironical expression. "I suppose you have an alibi too?"

"Does an honest man need an alibi?" Professor Johns inquired.

"He wouldn't, if the world played fair with itself," Samuels admitted, "but it doesn't."

"And I doubt if it ever will," Professor Johns declared emphatically. "I'm not so sure that it ought to, either. I've always had my doubts about the perfect state. If we knew no evil, virtue would lose its meaning. But I'm afraid I haven't an alibi for you. I was in the tower of the fort writing until half-past seven."

"You cannot substantiate that?"

"Not unless you can induce those ancient adobe bricks to speak in my behalf," Professor Johns smiled, polishing his glasses. "But my word never has been doubted, Mr. Samuels."

"I'm not doubting it. These questions have got to be asked. They are part of my job. Let's see, you are Professor Johns—"

"Herbert Johns, the marine biologist."

"You've been on San Lucas a good while, haven't you?"

"It must be twenty years since I came."

"You and Parados always good friends?"

"Mr. Parados had no friends."

"Well, were you on reasonably good terms?"

"Why not?"

"I am asking you, Professor."

"We had our differences, certainly. It would be impossible to have intimate contact with a man of Mr. Parados' disposition for fifteen years without having differ-

ences with him. None of them was serious, if that is what you mean. I should have packed up long ago if any of them had been."

There remained only Hendricks, the boatman, and Celia; and Samuels, having indicated with a nod that he had nothing more to ask Professor Johns, was about to address himself to Celia when Hendricks stepped forward.

"I'd like to say a word for the professor," he announced. "I believe I can give him that alibi you were talking about."

Morrison insists that a man's face is often as false as the worm holes in what purports to be a bit of old Sheraton, but I don't swallow all of his cynicism. Hendricks had already impressed me as being one of the two or three persons on San Lucas in whom I felt I might have implicit faith. He had a friendly voice and a ruddy countenance pleasantly freckled and as free of duplicity as a looking-glass. In the artificial light he seemed a trifle older than the twenty-three he turned out to be, but there was still a healthy boyishness about him as clean as wind and sea.

"Let's hear it," Samuels said curtly. "Your name?"

"John Hendricks. I run the launch. I've had the job for a couple of years."

"Go ahead."

"I'd been over to La Playa for the afternoon mail. I left La Playa around six, as usual. It would be six-thirty when I tied up below. Mr. Parados insisted on the *Nanette* being run like an Espee crack flyer. I went up to the house right away and left the mail satchel on the hall table, as I always do. Professor Johns had asked me to get him a book out of the La Playa library. It was something he wanted in a hurry—Spencer's Biology—and I went right up with it. He talked for a minute or two, then I pulled out. I'd had my supper in La Playa.

"Here's where the alibi comes in. When the tide is very low you can just about get across The Gut, but it's easier to go around the head of it. When it's high, as it was between six and seven to-night, no man that ever lived could make it. The Gut is a funnel. It would beat him to a pulp and suck him out to sea when the tide changed. It's only a couple of hundred yards from the tower to the house, but it's a mile around by the head of The Gut, and that means fifteen or twenty minutes of walking. The professor was in his room when I got there. He didn't look as if he had been running and he hadn't walked ahead of me. And it must have been seven when I left him. See what I mean?"

Samuels nodded. "How about your own alibi?"

"You mean I could have done it before I took the professor his book?"

"Yes."

"I guess I'm out of luck," Hendricks grinned. "But I wanted to set the professor right. He's been mighty decent to me."

"In what way?"

"Well, I don't figure on running a motor launch the rest of my life. The professor has helped me in science and English and German. He makes me stick at it, too." Hendricks laughed uneasily. "I'm almost scared to fall down on the stuff he sets me to do. I guess I'm not the studying kind."

"My young friend is depreciating himself," Professor Johns laughed. "He is an excellent pupil. It is a pleasure to tutor him. If he puts up with me much longer I shall be introducing him to the ocellus of the medusa."

"Why didn't you tell me about him bringing you that book?" Samuels demanded irritably.

"Is it important?"

"Important!" Samuels exclaimed. "It lets you out, that's all!"

"I hadn't thought of it in that light," Johns answered simply. "Hendricks is right about The Gut, though. That is the only way in which we can get from one side to the other. It usually takes me twenty minutes. Mr. Parados once thought of having it bridged, but he lost interest in the project."

"We'll have a look at The Gut to-morrow, Kirk," Samuels said to his aide. "Now, young lady," and he turned to Celia.

"Celia Ferris, secretary, twenty-two, unmarried, been here a year," the girl drawled. "I smoke, love to dance and play bridge; I like men better than women; am liked better by men than by women, and I can stand a cocktail when anybody else can. I was in my room reading *The Canary Murder Case* when it happened and I share with Miss Brent the distinction of being without the tiniest shred of an alibi."

"Does your flippancy express your feelings for the man who employed you?" Samuels demanded sharply.

"It doesn't begin to express them!" Celia retorted scornfully.

"I suppose you are one of these modern young things with opinions," Samuels said irritatingly, and I suspected that he was trying to draw her on. "And of course you believe in being yourself and expressing yourself and letting the world think what it pleases. Well, go ahead."

"Celia!" Annersley exclaimed sharply.

"I won't hush!" Celia cried passionately. "Lies, deceit—I'm sick of them! I'm going to say what's in my mind, if nobody else will say what's in his! There isn't one of us who didn't fear and hate Dan Parados! We had good reason to—every one of us! And he wanted us to! His instincts were perverted. He delighted in our fear and hatred. That was why he kept us around him. We amused him—fed his vanity—added to his sense of

power! He was the vainest man that ever lived—and the wickedest—"

"Celia!" Annersley shouted, and I felt the repressed dread that colored his utterance of the girl's name.

"It's true, Claude!" Celia swept furiously on. "You know it is! All of you do! I hated him—so did you, Claude! And Mrs. Parados and Professor Johns and Miss Jahries and Lum We—Miss Brent, too, I expect! M. Flique had the sense to see through us. He knows what we are! That's why he proposed his crazy game—only it wasn't crazy. If you want motives for killing Dan Parados, Mr. Samuels, ask Anatole Flique. He can give you half a dozen!"

Celia stopped abruptly, plunging us into silence as taut as humming wire, and I wondered again if it were good or evil, that distinctive quality with which she had already impressed me.

"Is this girl crazy?" Samuels demanded of Flique. "Or do you know what she is talking about?"

"Mademoiselle is indiscreet, perhaps, M. le Deputy, but she is not crazy." Flique twirled his mustache, considering Celia whimsically. "I am not even certain that she is indiscreet."

"But what about these motives she speaks of? And that game of yours?"

"It is so. And if monsieur will have the patience I shall inform him—*but later.*" Samuels scowled, but he evidently understood. "If mademoiselle will proceed," and Flique beamed upon Celia.

"Oh, I'm about through," Celia drawled, her casual self again. "Parados' telephone rang as I was going up to my room."

"Did he answer it?" Samuels almost pounced on the girl.

"Yes."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know exactly. Twenty-five minutes of seven, perhaps. I'd heard the hall clock strike the half hour a few minutes before."

"Did you overhear what he said?"

"Why, Mr. Samuels!"

"Answer the question!"

"No, Mr. Samuels," Celia said earnestly. "I didn't hear a single word. The Gut wouldn't have let me, if I'd tried to, you know."

Samuels muttered one of his imprecations and ran his arrogant eyes from one to another of us.

"Who called him?" His tone was ominous. "It must have been one of you."

A sharp silence fell.

"It was," Professor Johns said dryly. "I called him."

"What about?"

Professor Johns chuckled. "Parados had a fondness for the sea, especially when it was rough—a real affection, perhaps. It reached down into him as nothing human could. His ego, his abnormal feeling for power, was complemented by its strength, if I make myself clear. I have known him to stand on the edge of The Gut for half an hour when the tide was unusually high."

"He often did that," Mrs. Parados said.

"I called him up to remind him that the tide was one of the highest of the year," Professor Johns went on. "It was quite a sight and I thought he might like to see it."

"What did he say?"

The professor chuckled again. "He told me to go to the devil."

Samuels was disappointed. Frowning, he looked down at the body in front of the patio window.

"I've an idea you started him on his way, Professor,"

he muttered. "He must have got up and gone towards the window. Somebody must have opened it and shot him."

"I shall find that an unpleasant recollection," Professor Johns said in troubled tones. "It would seem to confirm your silencer theory," he continued, plucking at his neat gray beard. "If Miss Celia heard the telephone ring somebody would certainly have heard the shot, had it been fired in the ordinary way."

"A silencer was used," Samuels said positively. "That is certain."

"*Bien!*" Flique exclaimed. "That is so much. But M. le Deputy spoke of motive. That safe, now—were it opened much might be revealed to us, yes?"

"We ought to have opened it an hour ago." Samuels was irritated—whether by the omission or by the fact that Flique had drawn his attention to it, I could not decide. "If it could have been opened," he added. "Do you know the combination, Mrs. Parados?"

"I know where it is," she told him.

"The safe was open when I was in here with Parados," I interjected, having suddenly remembered that this was so.

"Parados probably shut it before he was shot," Samuels grunted.

Mrs. Parados had gone to the bookcase and taken down John Stuart Mill's *Political Economy*. It had a fine binding. Blowing the dust off the book, she opened it at about the middle and consulted what appeared to be figures written on the margin. She then replaced the volume, went to the safe, knelt in front of it, and began to turn the dial.

"Somebody has been here!" Samuels exclaimed, as he swung the door open.

A disarranged bundle of papers protruded from one of

the drawers, which had been forced. The other compartments were intact, apparently.

"Monsieur, that rose petal!" Flique cried out.

The petal to which Flique referred was small and yellow and it was flattened against the second tier of the bottom of the tiered section into which the great door fitted. Another of those horrible silences settled upon the room and Samuels, pulling out a penknife, dropped onto his knees in front of the safe. I did not look around, but I could *feel* Celia and Annersley staring at that flagrant splash of yellow with horror naked in their eyes.

Samuels carefully removed the yellow petal and stood up with it in the palm of his hand. His movements were deliberate and ominous and the expression of his face indicated a deep inward satisfaction at the significance of his find. As we turned around and faced the others I noticed that Grainger had gone, but I did not dwell on his absence just then. The splash of yellow in Samuels' hand and Annersley's tormented face and the feathered barbs Mrs. Parados' eyes were shooting at Celia filled the picture.

Samuels slipped the petal into an envelope he had found in one of his pockets.

"I'll trouble you for that yellow rose, Mr. Annersley."

X

BUTTONHOLES

It was Celia who tore the rose out of Annersley's buttonhole and flung it into Samuels' face.

"There it is!" she cried furiously. "I hope you'll be able to make something out of it!"

But Celia was frightened. Horror was looking out of her eyes and she seemed unable to lift them to Annersley's. Her feeling for him was deep—infinitely deeper than I had imagined. Annersley's eyes were defiant, but his cheek bones were red lamps in the white window of his face. My own reaction was one of relief, for Caroline was first in my thoughts.

Samuels picked up the rose and inspected it with studied deliberation. The red lamps in Annersley's cheek burned brighter and Celia shut her eyes. In spite of my relief, I could not help feeling sorry for Annersley. Samuels revealed his teeth for an instant, then he passed the rose and the envelope into which he had dropped the petal to Kirk.

"Take a squint at that rose, Kirk. Maybe you'll find some petals missing. And compare the shade and size of that petal with those of the rose."

"Dan had a powerful lens in the right-hand top drawer of his desk," Mrs. Parados announced with unconcealed satisfaction.

Instead of pouncing on Annersley, Samuels now signed to Flique, the doctor, and me to help him carry the body to a couch on the other side of the room. It was a ghastly business and I believe Samuels proposed it at that moment

for the express purpose of further demoralizing Annersley.

Meanwhile Kirk had found the lens.

When we turned around Grainger had come into the room again, I noticed. An apparently trifling incident occurred at that moment. Returning to the position he had occupied near the writing table, Flique took out his handkerchief, which was half as large as a tablecloth, and polished the top of his head; then he dropped the handkerchief. Grainger, who was near him, picked it up and Flique accepted it with his beaming smile. That was all.

"Well, Mr. Annersley, where did you get that rose?" Samuels inquired.

"Out of that bowl in the reception hall," Annersley said tersely.

"Buttonholes aren't as fashionable as they used to be," Samuels remarked.

"No."

It was taking all of Annersley's fortitude to keep him behind his fences.

"Oh, tell him, Claude!" Celia burst forth wildly. Annersley only tightened his lips and she whirled upon Samuels. "If you want to know, I gave it to him. I had had it in my hair and I thought it would be fun to pin it in his coat—"

"You wanted Dan to know you had given it to him," Mrs. Parados interrupted bitingly.

"What's that?" Samuels ejaculated and Kirk lifted his head from the lens.

"And what if I did?" Celia ignored Samuels and faced Mrs. Parados. "It wasn't for the reason you insinuate. How dare you! Your man was nothing to me. Because you couldn't hold him yourself do you think I wanted him? I detested him! I detest you!"

"Yet you stayed!" Mrs. Parados drawled.

"Celia!"

Annersley shouted her name with such vehemence that Celia reconsidered the retort on her lips and turned upon him instead.

"Some one has got to tell the truth, Claude. M. Flique knows what is in our hearts. He'll tell these men if we don't. He's got to. You hated Parados. You are glad he's dead. So am I. But you didn't kill him! Oh, Claude, Claude, you *couldn't* have!" And Celia, at this, seized the lapels of Annersley's dinner jacket and shook him with a passion that could only have sprung from a tormenting doubt of his innocence.

"Thank you, dear." Annersley's voice was tender and he patted her hand. "It's all right, Celia. I didn't kill him. Miss Jahries spoke for me, you remember. She has given me all the alibi I shall need. It'll take more than a rose petal to upset that. . . . What do you want to know, Samuels?"

"The truth, Annersley. What was the trouble between you and Parados?"

"Business."

"The Fleetwood Trading Company?"

"You've heard?"

"Some. Go ahead."

"I met Parados ten years ago," Annersley began bitterly. "He wasn't as well known then as he is now and he hadn't as much money. The idea of the proposed Fleetwood Trading Company was sound. The company was to go into districts around Los Angeles that were ripe for subdivision—Beverly Hills, say, and forestall the subdividers, who were bound to come later on, by buying and getting options on likely property. Parados wanted another hundred thousand dollars. I'd just come into some money—about that amount—and I let him have it. Parados put in more than I did and he placed his own directors on the board. That was all right. I didn't mind. Business wasn't my forte. He was a wizard at it.

"We made money. I was satisfied. There was a lot of talk about Parados, but he never bothered me and I minded my own business. That was up to a couple of months ago." The bitterness in Annersley's eyes as he paused made me think of hot irons on human flesh.

"The Fleetwood Trading Company didn't mean much to Parados by now—he had a dozen companies—but it meant everything to me. He sent for me. There was a fine opportunity to get hold of some beach property near Laguna, he said. Did I want to go in pretty deep? The stuff was sound, he assured me. Of course I did, since he recommended it. Everything he had touched had turned out right. I had about fifty thousand loose—all of it had come out of the Fleetwood Trading Company—and I turned it over to him. Every penny of it.

"Every one had told me he was a crook, but I never had any business sense. A month later, he sent for me again. The stuff was worthless, he said. We couldn't get a tenth of what we had paid for it. 'An error of judgment,' he called it. The liar! He went on to say that the company couldn't carry the load and the board—*his* board—had voted to accept a ridiculously small offer made by the South & West Funding Company. It would finish the Fleetwood Company and take my fifty thousand as well. I knew he could save the company if he wanted to, but he laughed in my face when I suggested that he do so. He laughed me out of his office. I dug around for myself—looked up the South & West. Well—" Annersley's lips were white as he paused again. "It was another of his companies. That's all."

"Parados was out to break you, eh?"

"Yes, I'll be out a hundred and fifty thousand."

"You *will* be? Hasn't it gone through yet?"

"It's—pending."

"Hmn." Samuels considered his cigar. "What are

you doing here to-night—in Parados' home?" he said quickly.

"I've been in the habit of coming." Annersley's eyes were reticent now. "I thought I'd try a last appeal."

"It failed?"

"He was killed before I could talk to him again," Annersley said huskily.

An instant of silence followed and a picture of Annersley bursting into the library, his cheeks burning, a newspaper clutched in his hand, stood out in my mind. It vanished as Samuels spoke.

"What did you mean by 'pending'?"

"Just that, Samuels,—pending." Annersley's eyes became wary. He was thinking desperately, reckoning his chances, I decided. How much should he admit to? "I don't believe Parados had signed the authorization," he went on uneasily. "Any of the papers, in fact."

"Why was Parados trying to break you, Annersley?" Samuels inquired deliberately.

"That was his little way," and Annersley breathed deeply. "His little joke. He—he wanted people to hate him."

"Yes, I know. I've heard a lot about that since I came over here, but I'd like to know why Parados began to express his hatred for you in this ruthless manner at this particular time."

"I've told you."

"No, you haven't. There was a reason. What was it?"

"Dig for it, then!" Annersley shouted furiously. "I've said all I'm going to say."

"Tell him, Claude!" Celia pleaded. "Tell him everything. Don't you understand that it *must* come out?" But Annersley was silent, his lips like wires, and Celia turned defiant eyes on Samuels again. "Don't you see? Parados wanted me—as he wanted Miss Brent—as he

wanted every decent-looking girl he ever set his eyes upon. And Claude and I were engaged! There, you've got it now!"

Samuels nodded and I knew he was telling himself that between them Celia and Annersley had equipped the latter with as fine a pair of motives as any dogged-minded police officer could wish for. I was sorry, but I was also glad, and when Caroline looked at me as she did just then, her eyes troubled and deeper than I had yet seen them, I forgot to be sorry. A man cannot do opposing ideas justice at the same time. I don't mean that I had convicted Annersley in my own mind, either. I hadn't. There was Miss Jahries' alibi to be disposed of, first.

"Parados knew you two were engaged?" Samuels inquired.

"Yes," Annersley admitted.

"Why did you remain here, Miss Ferris?"

Celia colored. "Claude wanted me to leave. I didn't because—because—oh, don't you see? If I had broken with Parados he would have ruined the Fleetwood Company—and Claude. He was holding it over our heads. He—he wanted me. Why didn't I let Claude take me away!" And Celia began to weep.

Caroline put her arms around Celia, while Annersley looked on miserably. I felt just a trifle ashamed of my relief.

"Dan talked of divorcing me," Mrs. Parados put in contemptuously. "He'd even have married *her*. I shouldn't have been surprised if she'd taken him, either."

"How dare you!" Celia cried, dashing the tears from her eyes. "How dare you say such a wicked thing?"

Mrs. Parados laughed and Caroline's eyes sparkled with indignation.

"That wasn't necessary, Mrs. Parados," Caroline protested.

"How do you know it wasn't?" Mrs. Parados retorted.

"What do you know of my life with Dan Parados? Haven't I seen his women come and go for nearly twenty years?"

Fortunately, Kirk looked up just then.

"This rose seems to have lost three or four of its petals," he announced heavily. "It's the same shade as the loose petal, too."

Samuels inspected the rose and the petal through the lens, nodding as he did so; and then, with a casual air, he offered them to Flique. The latter's polite interest in the interrogation of Annersley had been faintly salted with derision, I had thought, but he declined the lens, the rose and the petal with the politest of bows.

"The word of monsieur is sufficient," he murmured.

Samuels did not appear to relish this and he turned irritably to Annersley.

"Where is that authorization of assignment Parados hadn't put his signature to—do you know?"

"I do not."

Samuels lighted another cigar, considering Annersley as he did so.

"Do you suppose it was in that safe?"

"I don't know," Annersley said again.

Samuels exhaled cigar smoke. "Have you any idea how that petal got inside the safe?"

"I don't know," Annersley said for the third time. A vein in his forehead throbbed, but he kept his head up and his eyes steady.

"Huh," Samuels grunted. "You know none of these things, yet a drawer in Parados' safe has been broken open, papers valuable to you may have been in it, the safe was open when Hunt left the room, you hated Parados, and"—Samuels paused, running his stormy eyes up and down Annersley's dapper figure,—"and you were wearing a yellow rose that has lost some of its petals."

"And yellow roses frequently lose their petals," Anners-

ley replied, in a brittle voice, "and half an hour ago you were advising Miss Brent to confess, and half an hour from now it may be"—Annersley glanced around,—"shall we say Mrs. Parados?"

"Why not?" the latter inquired.

"I'm not accusing you, Annersley," Samuels retorted grimly, "and I'm not forgetting Miss Brent. These points have got to be cleared up."

Annersley shrugged. "I can't help it if the person who killed Parados happened to be wearing a yellow rose. That's my bad luck. But there's one thing you have forgotten, apparently—Miss Jahries' statement."

"Miss Jahries did not actually see you during all of that half hour, any more than you actually saw her."

Annersley looked around. "Can you help him, Miss Jahries?" he inquired ironically.

As Miss Jahries came nearer her somber eyes told me that she had known more of life than any woman ought to. Then I remembered that she had said she would give anything to see a New England meadow and a singing stream.

"I saw Mr. Annersley distinctly three times while I was in my room," she declared in a level voice. "I opened the window as soon as I went in and he was sitting on the terrace. Ten minutes later the room began to get cold and I lowered the window. He still was there. Fifteen minutes after that I got up to go out, but I first closed the window. Mr. Annersley still was sitting on the terrace. In the intervals I heard him cough and I smelled the smoke from his cigar. He could not possibly have left his chair and taken the time to do what has been done and got back to his chair without my knowing it."

"Convinced?" Annersley wanted to know.

Before Samuels could answer, Anatole Flique chose to abandon his negative rôle and make an inquiry.

"The petal of this rose, M. le Deputy,—it is the principal evidence against M. Annersley, yes?"

"So far," Samuels admitted tersely.

"But if I were to show you another rose—what then?"

"Where is it?"

Flique dived into a waste-paper basket behind him and stood up with a yellow rose in his hand. It was of the Gold of Ophir variety and similar in size and development to the one on the writing table.

"*Voila!*" Flique exclaimed, and he flourished the rose in our faces.

Samuels took it well, I thought, making a pretense of examining the rose with the lens. A warm glow spread over Annersley's face, but true to himself he was reticent in his relief and it was Celia who expressed what both of them felt.

"Oh, Claude!" she wept ecstatically. Her eyes discharged a broadside at Mrs. Parados, then she buried her face in Annersley's coat.

"Are you satisfied?" Annersley inquired dryly.

"It's your trick," Samuels admitted.

"I'm no longer a suspect, then?"

"No more so than any one else in the house," Samuels grunted.

"Dear Sherlock is generous!" Celia wept from Annersley's coat.

I was anxious again about Caroline. Samuels was the kind of man who must have a theory of some sort and I realized that Flique's discovery would direct his suspicions towards her again. Caroline's eyes were apprehensive and questioning, but Flique gave her an encouraging smile and she seemed to draw comfort from it.

"When did you first notice that rose, Flique?" Samuels demanded.

"But a moment ago, M. le Deputy," Flique informed him with a cherubic smile. "I cast my eyes down and it was there. I was astonished. It will be *nécessaire* to commence again, yes?"

"Not altogether," Samuels said dryly, and I knew that he was thinking of Caroline. "I suppose your husband wasn't given to buttonholes, Mrs. Parados?" he asked.

"Dan!" Mrs. Parados, who had not quite managed to conceal her chagrin at the discovery of the second rose, laughed without humor. "He once discharged an executive for coming into his office with a sprig of mignonette in his coat."

"I don't wear buttonholes, either, Mr. Samuels," Caroline said unexpectedly.

Her blue eyes were challenging and derisive and their deep look had all but drowned the apprehension I had seen in them a moment before. The high order of her courage had impressed itself upon me at the first and I felt a deep personal pride as it reasserted itself. Samuels' eyes smouldered with suspicion as he looked at Caroline and my blood began to warm up. The interruption that occurred at that moment was fortunate.

"The phœnix is gone!" Mrs. Parados suddenly shrilled. "Dan's jade phœnix!"

Mrs. Parados was pointing at the empty glass case on the mantel—the glass case that had appeared to cause Dan Parados such acute distress a minute or two before I left him.

XI

A PIECE OF JADE

So it was a phœnix, a jade phœnix, that had occupied the glass case! And Parados' reaction to his discovery that the case was empty had given me the feeling that something inside of him was being torn up by the roots! I saw again the corded muscles of his neck, his white knuckles, his swarthy face the color of dirty water.

"What are you talking about, Mrs. Parados?" Samuels demanded sharply.

"I'm talking about Dan's jade phœnix," Mrs. Parados retorted. "He kept it in that glass case over there. Don't you see that the case is empty? I just noticed. Dan thought the world of it."

Mrs. Parados was badly shaken. The pockets under her eyes were bloodless.

"I don't understand you," Samuels said irritably. "A phœnix—what do you mean?"

Both Professor Johns and I were on the point of enlightening him, when Anatole Flique proceeded to do so himself.

"A remarkable bird, M. le Deputy," Flique said, twirling his mustache. "Those ancients believed in it. And why not, I ask you? They had the inward eye and a philosophy instead of motor cars and unfermented wine. Truly, messieurs et mesdames, we have journeyed far! But it was almost immortal, that phœnix, and always of the female. Five hundred—perhaps a thousand—years it lived—*qui sait?* Its colors were of the purple, the crimson, the gold, and perhaps it had the body of an eagle, but again—who knows? Perhaps it carried the body of

its parent,—um—embalmed in a ball of myrrh to the altar of the Temple of the Sun, for it is the soul of the sun, that bird; or perhaps it died alone in its nest of twigs and spices, out of its ashes arising the new phœnix—but who am I, Anatole Flique, the principal agent of *la Sureté* to speak of such matters? A glorious bird, that, messieurs et mesdames! Fortunate was the eye that fell upon it. *C'est ça, n'est-ce pas,* M. le Professeur?"

"Approximately," Professor Johns smiled. "There are many legends, of course."

"Précisément!" Flique bowed. "And I have consulted many encyclopedias."

"Parados had one of those birds, you mean?" Samuels asked.

"Not alive, monsieur," Flique assured him gravely, "but in jade. It was sometimes a symbol of the luck, that marvelous bird, and those wise ones made it in silver and gold and ebony and jade. The Chinese loved their jade and they worked with a delicacy, a precision. It is not so nowadays."

"How much was it worth?"

Flique shrugged his plump shoulders. "M. l'Antiquaire?"

"Perhaps two thousand dollars," I said. "It depends on the workmanship. They are quite rare."

"Dan wouldn't have sold his for a million dollars," Mrs. Parados asserted. "I'm not exaggerating, either."

"Why did he value it so highly?" Samuels wanted to know.

Mrs. Parados shut her eyes for an instant and it was my impression that she was drawing a veil over something she did not wish us to see. The disappearance of the phœnix had moved her more deeply than she intended to admit, I thought.

"It was Dan's lucky piece," Mrs. Parados said. "His talisman."

"You mean he had a superstitious regard for it?" Samuels was slightly incredulous.

"Yes, I do. Dan came of peasant stock. He believed the phœnix brought him his money. His luck changed the day he first saw it, he used to say. The older he got the more he believed in it. He had good reason to. His luck held for twenty-five years. It held up to half-past six to-night." Mrs. Parados gave a freezing laugh. "The day he lost his lucky piece he lost his life."

I am not superstitious, but it gave me a queer feeling, that fantastic coincidence. The bit of carved jade on which Parados had based the colossal structure of his life stolen but an hour or two before he was killed! It was of a piece with the astonishing fact that Parados, the richest man in the state, had died with a thirty-five cent price ticket clutched to his breast. Both were stupendous. The room was quiet until Samuels spoke.

"The one who shot Parados took the bird," he said aggressively. "Maybe that's why he was shot."

"The phœnix," I replied deliberately, "was taken *before* Parados was shot."

"How do you know?"

I told him, describing the effect the empty glass case had had upon Parados.

"You don't think Parados knew it was gone until the moment you saw him look at the case?"

"I'm sure of it," I said positively.

"Where did your husband get the phœnix, Mrs. Parados?"

"I don't know."

"How long have you been married to him?"

That tormented look I had seen in Mrs. Parados' eyes several times during the evening leaped into them again.

"For twenty years," she said huskily. "Twenty years of hell."

"To-day," Flique murmured, "is the twentieth—um—

anniversary of the wedding of monsieur and madame. Also, it is the birthday of madame. But that is the way of life," and Flique polished the top of his head with his handkerchief.

"Did he have the phœnix when you married him, Mrs. Parados?"

"Yes. He'd started to make money, then. I didn't marry him for love."

"You are sure he thought as much of it as you have suggested?"

"He was a fool about it—always," Mrs. Parados said.

"A man of his parts—his outstanding success!" Samuels muttered. "I don't see how he could have fallen for such bunk—"

"Because you have not the inward eye, *mon ami,*" Flique interposed with a chuckle. "Now I, who am the principal agent of *la Sureté,* comprehend perfectly this husband of madame's. He was of the peasant stock—his were the peasant—um—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?" and Flique snapped his fingers at me.

"Superstitions," I ventured.

"Précisément!" Flique bowed. "It was in the blood and bone of monsieur. I ask you, does a million dollars change the heart of a man?"

"Admitted," Samuels grunted. "Where was your husband born, Mrs. Parados?"

"In France. But his father was Greek. His mother was French."

"You met him on this side?"

"In New York."

"Tell me what you know of his past. Before you met him, I mean."

"I don't know anything of his past."

"You don't expect me to believe that?"

"I don't care whether you believe it or not," Mrs. Parados said cuttingly. "It is so."

"But you've been married to him for twenty years!"

"It wouldn't have made any difference if I'd been married to him for two hundred years," Mrs. Parados declared emphatically. "Dan told me nothing about his past. He said his past was none of my business."

"But your natural curiosity?"

"I tell you I know nothing of his past, Mr. Samuels."

The deputy let it go at that, but I doubted if he was satisfied. I wasn't myself. Parados had been the type of man to keep his past to himself, but I could not quite see a woman of Mrs. Parados' temperament—any temperament, Morrison would have said—living with a man for twenty years without unearthing something about his earlier life.

"Do you connect the disappearance of the phœnix with the murder of Parados?" Annersley inquired.

Samuels frowned. "Yes, I do, although Hunt here says it was gone before Parados was killed."

"It would be interesting to know when the phœnix was last seen," Professor Johns observed.

"And by whom," Mrs. Parados drawled.

"Any of you people seen this phœnix to-day?" Samuels demanded.

Grainger, it appeared, had seen it in the morning when he had laid kindling in the grate, Manning had noticed it before lunch when she had dusted the room, and Miss Jahries had seen it in the early afternoon. About half-past two, Miss Jahries said.

"I came in to see if Manning had dusted the room properly. Mr. Parados was very particular. I looked at the glass case because it shows the dust so."

"And the phœnix was in it, then—at half-past two?"

"Yes."

No one admitted seeing it since then.

"Some one did—that's certain," Samuels said grimly.

A clock in the hall began to strike twelve just then. There is always a depressing finality about the striking of the last hour of the day, but I never felt it as acutely as I did at that moment. The room was silent and there was silence in our hearts and that slow tolling stalked through the house like a living presence.

"That'll do for to-night," Samuels said. "You may go up to your rooms now. None of you will leave the island. Is that understood?"

"You are taking a pretty high-handed attitude," Annersley protested indignantly.

"What I say goes until this business is settled."

"But you've got our alibis!"

"I'm not taking any chances." Samuels' tone was abrupt. "That's all for to-night. I want to talk to Flique."

"Miss Brent would like to know where she stands," I said bluntly. "You practically accused her a while ago of killing Parados. Have you changed your mind?"

"No."

His positive tone angered me. "How can you take such an unreasonable attitude?" I demanded. "You say Parados was killed with a pistol equipped with a silencer! Where in the name of common sense could a girl of Miss Brent's type have gotten hold of such an instrument? And what about the phœnix? It was gone at least an hour before she attempted to take the portrait. Don't these facts mean anything to you?"

Samuels' eyes were hot as he faced me.

"You pretty-girl-ridden fools make me ill. Hasn't Miss Brent two strong motives? Isn't she without an alibi? Hasn't she admitted breaking into the house to commit a theft? Didn't you and Flique catch her at it? Didn't that locked door make it necessary for her to go around to the west side? Mightn't Parados' own gun

have been used? Has any real contrary evidence been turned up? Go to bed and sleep on it, son. You'll feel better in the morning."

I was furious enough to shove my fist into his mouth, and I think I should have done so if Caroline had not caught me fiercely by the arm.

"Mr. Hunt!" she was crying. "You cannot help me in that way. Please, oh, please, don't say any more!"

She was right, of course, and when I saw Flique and Johns shaking their heads reprovingly, I began to cool down. Samuels grunted his disgust and lighted another cigar.

"It was dear of you!" Caroline whispered, and I felt that I hadn't come out of it so badly after all. "I do thank you for all you have done for me!"

She gave me a slow, serious smile, a quirky, devastating smile that left me staring after her, as she fled from the room, with an ache in my breast. I tucked it away in one of those niches memory reserves for its imperishables. Johns nodded brightly and vanished through the patio window. The servants, Annersley, and Celia had already gone. I took myself off with a winged sensation in my heels. Mrs. Parados was the last to leave. I was half way up the stair when she reached the door of the library.

"Madame!" I heard Flique say.

His tone made me glance over my shoulder. Mrs. Parados had stopped in the doorway.

"Yes?"

"Madame, at the commencement of our little game you said that you saw M. Annersley enter the patio window shortly after half-past six—"

"That was only a game, M. Flique," Mrs. Parados said harshly.

"You did not see M. Annersley, madame?"

"No."

A terrific emphasis was behind that single word—an emphasis that was unnecessary, I reflected, as I continued up the stair.

There was no thought of sleep in my mind as I entered my room. An armchair by the window invited and I dropped into it. Parados' death was deplorable and I was deeply apprehensive on Caroline's behalf, but since the affair would have happened whether I had been present or not, I wouldn't have missed it for a good deal. In the first place, I needed shaking out of the rut my life was beginning to follow. A man should have occasional contact with the elemental brutalities, if he is to retain a balanced perspective of life. And in the second place, there was Caroline.

Leaning back in the chair, a cigarette lighted, I let Caroline occupy my thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. It was becoming increasingly clear to me that there was a good deal more to life than the buying and selling of antiques.

But the tragedy quickly became uppermost in my mind again and I forced myself to take a neutral view of Caroline's position. Undeniably, she had motive, and undeniably, the facts were against her. Samuels had stated his case with uncompromising clearness. There was much to be said for his attitude. Incidentally, Parados deserved the bullet that had been sent through his black heart.

My faith in Caroline was supported by the incongruity of the idea that a girl of her type could have obtained a pistol fitted with a silencer, and by the hatred of Parados which prevailed in the house. The possibility that Parados had been killed with his own gun weakened the first point, but the second was unassailable. Annersley, Mrs. Parados, and Celia had had tremendously strong motives for putting Parados out of the way; and Celia had not hesitated to accuse Johns, Miss Jahries and Lum We of

succumbing to that appalling hatred Parados had gloried in. Even Grainger had admitted when, during the game, Mrs. Parados had sent for and questioned him, that he disliked her husband. But most of these people had sound alibis, while Caroline had none.

Finding pencil and paper on a writing table by the window, I proceeded to draw up a summary of the whereabouts of each one of us between half-past six and seven:

Annersley: Smoking on north terrace. Miss Jahries saw and heard him there. Insists he could not have left chair long enough to kill Parados without her knowing it. Has strong motive.
Miss Jahries: Annersley insists she was in her room all of time. May have motive.
Mrs. Parados: In her room. Manning with her. May have motive.
Professor Johns: In his tower room. Hendricks confirms this. May have motive.
Hendricks: En route from launch to fort via house with mail and book. See above. Alibi incomplete.
Celia: In her room reading. Not confirmed. Has strong motive.
Caroline: On the cliff. Not confirmed. Has strong motive.
Flique: Walking on the island. Unconfirmed.
Grainger: Having supper in kitchen. Lum We confirms. May have motive.
Lum We: Preparing dinner. Grainger confirms. May have motive.
Hunt: In bedroom. Unconfirmed.

There was also the possibility that Parados, who had hosts of enemies, had been shot by some person who had come to the island for the specific purpose of killing him. It was a reasonable possibility, but it did not kindle my enthusiasm.

My eyes rested on the name at the top of the list. Annersley's alibi looked sound, but his motive was powerful and Miss Jahries might have lied. If the insult Parados had offered Miss Jahries as she took me upstairs were a fair example of his attitude toward her, it was quite conceivable that she had lied. The look in her eyes when Parados told me to keep my eyes on my cuff links was still fresh in my memory. Moreover, Annersley was afraid. He had been afraid before the rose petal was found, and he was still afraid, although the discovery of the second rose had destroyed the significance of the petal. I wondered what he was afraid of.

It was then that I remembered the newspaper clutched in Annersley's hand as he burst into the library while I was with Parados. The way he had held it—as if something were concealed between the two halves of the paper—was what bothered me. Some heavy object too bulky for the pockets of Annersley's dinner clothes, perhaps? Getting up, I began to walk the floor excitedly.

Annersley had backed out through the patio window between six-twenty-five and six-thirty. Parados was killed within the next twenty-five minutes—probably within the next ten or fifteen minutes. *If* Annersley's newspaper had concealed a pistol, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Miss Jahries had lied and that it was he who had killed Parados. At the beginning of the game Mrs. Parados had said she had seen Annersley enter the patio window of the library shortly after half-past six. A few minutes ago, when Flique had questioned her about her statement, she had denied its truth and attributed it to the game. Was her denial a lie? And if it was, why had she lied?

Still assuming that Annersley was guilty, I tried to visualize his movements after leaving Parados and me.

"He wouldn't go up to his room," I muttered. "No, he must have hung around outside—in the patio, perhaps

—until I had gone. Then he went in again, shot Parados, and threw the pistol into the sea. If I'm right, that newspaper is lying around outside. In the patio or upon the terrace, probably."

I wanted that newspaper. It wasn't at all likely that it would indicate what Annersley had held between its two halves, but one could never tell. I had nothing against Annersley—he would be a likeable fellow under ordinary circumstances—and Parados was a blackguard who had got no more than his due; but I was determined to spare no one in my efforts to pull Caroline clear of this ghastly business.

As I had reasoned that the newspaper would be outside, I left my room by way of the window and the outside stair. The wind had stiffened. I drew great gusts of it into my lungs and the taint of the house was driven out of me. A gate in the cypress hedge led me into the patio. As I picked my way along a cinder path, guided by light that filtered faintly through the drawn curtains of the library windows, formidable blacknesses resolved themselves into shrubs and small palms and acacias. The air was alive and scented and tingling with the salty breeze. I felt the concealed beauty of the inclosure.

Chairs and one or two small tables and a few potted plants were scattered about the terrace, but I managed to pick my way among them without barking my shins and arousing the house. To my disappointment I did not find Annersley's *Times,* and I stood on the edge of the terrace trying to make up my mind whether to extend the field of my search or go in to Flique and Samuels and tell them what was on my mind.

The patio was as black as a witch's hat beyond the reach of the light from the library windows, but I was able to make out on my left an outside stair similar to the one I had just come down. The house was built like an L, its wing joining the east end of the body of the

house. The stair in question ascended the west side of the wing to a flat roof above the sun room. Doors and windows looked out upon the flat roof, but all of these were in darkness.

A sense of desolation oppressed me. I shuddered and stepped down into the patio. Something hidden by the shadow of one of the potted plants rustled beneath my feet and I bent excitedly. It was a newspaper—a copy of the *Times*. The wind had dropped it there, no doubt. Likely enough it would not tell me anything, but my hands trembled as I spread it out on one of the tables and struck a match.

I saw nothing at first; and then as the match burned a larger hole in the darkness an exclamation escaped me. Two small stains about the size of a dime were visible near the center of the sheet. I touched one of them with my finger. It was an oil stain!

"It may not have come from a pistol," I reflected, "but it's more than I expected. Annersley is the kind of fellow who would keep a mechanism well oiled."

I picked my way towards the patio window, thoroughly convinced that Annersley was guilty and thoroughly delighted with myself. It was not until I reached the window step that I remembered the piece of jade upon which Parados had built the incredible edifice of his life . . . and the thirty-five-cent price ticket we had found clutched in his hand. Neither the disappearance of the one nor the incongruity of the other tied up convincingly with my fine theory of Annersley's guilt, and quite suddenly I found myself convinced of nothing at all . . . except that Parados had lost his life within an hour or two of losing his lucky piece.

Nevertheless, I pushed into the library.

XII

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN"

FLIQUE, Samuels and Kirk looked up from a litter of papers spread out on the writing table.

"Hello," the deputy exclaimed none too pleasantly. "I said good night to you half an hour ago."

"I didn't go to bed," I informed him.

"Another of these Sherlocks, I suppose. You ought to hold it back until the end of the case."

"Come, monsieur," Flique interposed tactfully. "We must work together. M. l'Antiquaire has something to say. I see it in his eye. Is it not so?"

Samuels must have seen it, too, for he waited for me to go on.

"It's about Annersley," I began.

"Trying to get him in wrong again?"

"Monsieur!" Flique said sharply.

Clearly the man was on edge, for Flique would have told him of his "little game" by this, and I concluded that the network of motive uncovered by the game and his own interrogation of the household had given him something to think about. His manner became attentive as soon as I had got into what I had come to say and he heard me through with increasing interest.

"It certainly comes back to Annersley," he muttered, as I displayed the oil stains on the newspaper, "but there's still that alibi Miss Jahries gave him."

"I can tell you something about Miss Jahries, too," and I proceeded to describe the "cuff links" episode.

"Mademoiselle had nothing to say to that abominable insult?" Flique inquired vehemently.

"Nothing. It was my impression that she had to take that sort of thing from Parados," I said thoughtfully.

"Yet she stays with him." Samuels said in perplexity. "It's a queer house." He sniffed at the oil stains. "We'll have Captain Geddes put this under his microscope to-morrow. He's a shark at that sort of thing. If there should happen to be a little powder in the oil . . ." Samuels paused and looked at Flique. His condescending attitude towards the little man was completely gone. "What do you think about it?"

Flique shrugged his plump shoulders. "If there should be a little powder in the oil, as you say, monsieur."

Samuels nodded, showing his teeth. "If I were convinced Annersley had done it I'd go after that Jahries woman until she cracked."

"You have the evidence," I persisted, for I was still thinking of Caroline.

"Why should she be shielding him?"

"Why do women shield men?" I asked impatiently "Necessity, perhaps. He may have some hold on her."

"Has the Brent girl some hold on you?" Samuels wanted to know.

Flique frowned, but I was getting used to Samuels and I did not especially resent the question.

"I never saw Miss Brent before to-night," I told him, "but I like her tremendously—if you care to call that a 'hold.' And I'm going to do what I can for her."

"Fair enough," Samuels grinned. "Of course you know Annersley's word is as good as yours?"

"You mean he'll deny that this is his newspaper and that he had it in his hand when he broke into the library?"

"He may. He'll fight for himself, just as you are fighting for the Brent girl. You'd lie for her, wouldn't you?"

Before I could answer this pertinent question, Flique interposed briskly.

"Come, M. l'Deputy! Let us consider the evidence we have against the suspect. M. l'Antiquaire shall sit at the feet of our united wisdoms. The little mademoiselle, now. You have against her—what?"

"Two strong motives and an attempted burglary."

"And M. Annersley?"

"Two motives just as strong—money and the girl—and what Hunt has just told us."

"*Mais oui.* And that rose petal?"

"It doesn't mean anything in face of the rose you found in the waste paper basket."

"Ah, that rose! We shall speak of that again, *mon ami.* Madame Parados?"

"She hated her husband. So did the Ferris girl. And maybe Johns and Grainger and Jahries and Lum We, the cook. From what you tell me, that game of yours was neat work, Flique. They are a merry gang. Every one of them with a reason for rubbing Parados out and most of 'em hating him enough to do so."

Samuels began to pace up and down the room as thoroughly perplexed an officer of the law as I'd ever met outside of a detective story.

"Monsieur is doleful," Flique chuckled. "Let us consider the clews. That petal, now."

"You shot holes in that."

"The rose I found in the basket, then?"

"I'd like to know who put it there," Samuels muttered.

Flique twirled his mustache. "What would you say, *mes amis,* if I informed you that my rose was not in that basket ten minutes before I found it there?"

We looked at him in astonishment.

"You let us believe—" Samuels was beginning, when Flique stopped him.

"What you wished to believe, monsieur. I said nothing."

"Who put it there?"

"Look upon the rose, my friends." Flique picked up the second rose and laid it in the palm of his hand. "It has a thorn—two thorns—on its stem. And upon one of the thorns is a small moisture—a redness." He held the lens over the stem of the rose and Samuels, Kirk and I glanced through it in turn.

"Blood!" the deputy exclaimed, for that was what the lens revealed the tiny red stain on the stem to be. "I don't know how I missed that." Samuels was annoyed at himself.

"Also this," Flique beamed triumphantly, and he waved his enormous handkerchief in our faces.

Four small red stains spoiled the whiteness of the handkerchief.

"Whose blood is this?" Samuels demanded curtly.

Flique laid the handkerchief and rose on the table.

"This is what I know, M. le Deputy. When madame opened the safe and the petal was revealed to us and we —um—comprehended its—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?" and Flique snapped his fingers at me.

"Significance?" I ventured.

"*Merci,* monsieur," and Flique bowed. "—the rose was not in the basket. But it was then that the admirable Grainger went out of the room. A moment, and he had returned. I did not perceive him come in, but when my eye fell upon his hand I saw—blood. A curious matter, that! Monsieur would have agreed that we should have record of it? *Mais oui.* I dropped the handkerchief and the admirable Grainger picked it up. You see? And then I looked in that basket. That rose was there and blood was upon its thorn. *Mon dieu,* but I was astonished!" and Flique found another handkerchief, equally enormous, with which to polish his head.

This piece of information staggered us. Grainger's hatred of Parados had been stressed less than that of any one else, yet here was evidence that he had involved

himself to the extent of directing suspicion away from Annersley by means of a trick at the moment when it pointed most sharply towards him. Samuels began to pace agitatedly up and down, chewing at his cigar. Kirk didn't say anything, but he kept opening and shutting his hands as if he were grasping at something.

"Let me get this straight," Samuels muttered. "We find the petal. It involves Annersley. Then you find the second rose—that lets him out. Now you tell me that Grainger dropped the rose into the basket just after we found the petal. That makes it look as if Grainger knew Annersley *did not* kill Parados, and wanted to do him a good turn without telling us how much he was on to, or else that he knew Annersley *did* kill Parados and was trying to switch us off his trail. And that leaves Annersley about where he was. God!" Samuels passed his hand over his wiry head.

"Compose yourself, monsieur," Flique urged, spreading his plump hands. "What is this but one of the little mysteries that give the zest to life? Did we always know what awaited us around the corner life would be an emptiness. *Hélas,*" he sighed, "you have not the inward eye."

"You did a good job with that handkerchief," Samuels conceded. "I'll keep it, if you don't mind."

"I am the principal agent of *la Sureté,* monsieur," he answered with dignity. *"Alors!"* and he was beaming again. "This petal is something, perhaps—and yet, it may be nothing. Let us forget it and proceed with our little clews. That blackness on the carpet in front of the safe there."

"Crude oil," Kirk informed us briefly. "Wastage from one of the oil burners. Congeals when it hits the water. Some'dy trod on a gob of it along the shore and traipsed it in here."

"We'll check up every pair of shoes in the house,"

Samuels said, when Kirk had ceased firing his bullets of fact, "but I doubt if it'll get us far. Everybody here will go down to the beach from time to time. You find that stuff from one end of the California coast to the other."

"Did I not swim at one of your shores?" Flique inquired, gesturing animatedly. "Did I not sleep on the sand and awaken to find my person horribly humiliated? *Parbleu,* shall I ever forget it! And now, monsieur, there is that phœnix."

"The phœnix," Samuels repeated, adding one of his muttered imprecations. "I can't place the thing. It doesn't fit in with the rest of the pattern. Parados kept the thing half his life—built his success upon it, his wife says; then it disappears and he's shot to death a couple of hours later. It doesn't make sense. If it had disappeared at the time he was killed—"

"But it didn't," I interrupted. "And its disappearance does not fit in with your Miss Brent theory."

"Your Annersley theory, either," he reminded me grimly. "Are you sure that glass case was empty when you left Parados?"

"Oh, quite," I told him.

"It is another of the little mysteries," Flique continued volubly. "And that price ticket for thirty-five cents we found in the dead hand of monsieur—that, my friends, is yet another. Perhaps it will take us to the big mystery of which all the little mysteries are a part. *Eh bien, nous verrons.* And we *shall* see, messieurs. I assure you of that!" The little man twirled his mustache and beamed upon Samuels. "But we have our clews. Perhaps they are false—we do not know. Shall we put the heads together, M. le Deputy? Come, I shall be your inward eye and you shall be the outward eye of Anatole Flique! Is it a compact?"

"Fair enough," Samuels said, without a great deal of

enthusiasm. Then he grinned. "You might begin by telling us what brought you to San Lucas."

Flique chuckled. "You have me there, my friend. Very well, it shall be as you say. I have been at the house three times during the past four months. It is an old story. It is twenty-five years old, that story. Messieurs, I speak of the robbery of the *Banque du Midi.* You do not remember that robbery. And why should you? What is one robbery—one shooting—in this country of the big idea? *Pouf!* You have them every hour. But in my France *c'est différent.* We have our artists of the crime. Such were those little ones, Jules Lacôte, Cicéron Bec, and le Balafré, The Scarred One."

Flique paused to twirl his mustache and observe the effect of those names. On myself it was much the same as it had been when I had first heard the last two of them. A cold wind seemed to blow through the room. I found my eyes traveling towards the sheeted figure on the couch and I shuddered at the fantastic notion that leaped into my head. But that was nonsense! The room was quiet. I could hear the petulant whimper of the surf.

"Bec and le Balafré," Samuels muttered. "Those names sound familiar."

"Ah, you think of those desperate ones who escaped from *l'Ile du Diable* seven months ago. Those are the two. Patience! I have an extraordinary tale for you. In June of the year 1904, those three robbed the *Banque du Midi* in Marseilles. It was a notable affair. A million francs was secured and a patron of the bank who attempted resistance was shot. That patron—a merchant of antiques, like M. Hunt—died the next day. I shall tell you something about him presently. Well, those *canaille* got away. I was then attached to the Marseilles police—not until afterwards did I become the principal agent of *la Sureté* of Paris—and I was directed to secure their apprehension.

"My superior was wise in his choice. Three days passed and I received an information concerning two of those three—Cicéron Bec and le Balafré. They were lodged in a certain place. I went with my men, and—well, it was so. There was a combat, but those rascals were overcome with a rapidity and we took them away. But what of Jules Lacôte and that million francs, you ask. Messieurs, I cannot tell you. It was the grand—um—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"Perhaps you mean double-cross," I suggested at random.

"Précisément!" Flique exclaimed, beaming. "A singular word, but an expressive. Well, those *canaille* were sentenced to *l'Ile du Diable,* where my France sends her little ones to repent of their sins. It is an awkward place, that island, and most difficult to leave. But of Lacôte and that million francs we hear nothing. And nothing have we heard of them since. But what all this to do with the presence of Anatole Flique in the home of M. Parados, you ask?"

Flique paused dramatically; and then, his plump hands gesturing extravagantly, "Messieurs, I am here because of that jade phœnix."

We should not have been more startled had he said he had come to murder Parados. Samuels shook his head as if he were trying to clear his brain of a fog.

"Where does the phœnix come in?" he demanded tersely.

"I shall tell you," Flique continued, exuberantly cheerful again. "It is an astonishing thing—an incredible! That merchant of antiques recognized Jules Lacôte, who shot him. Lacôte, it seemed, had been intrigued by an *objet d'art* in the window of that merchant's shop and he had gone in and bought it. You see?" Flique spread his hands. "Must I tell monsieur what it was that Jules

Lacôte bought from that unfortunate merchant of antiques?"

"I guess you don't need to," Samuels muttered.

I was glad of the silence that followed, and I think Samuels was, too. You cannot take in a thing like that at one bite. Lacôte had bought the phœnix from the man he had killed . . . and twenty-five years afterwards Anatole Flique had come to San Lucas seeking it . . . and Dan Parados had lost it two hours before he was shot to death with a thirty-five-cent price ticket in his hand. I shook my head much as Samuels had done. It wouldn't do. That sort of nonsense was too fantastic for belief. Samuels must have thought so, too.

"It can't be the same phœnix," he said.

"As to that, we shall see," and Flique shrugged. "But it is clear that this Lacôte believed in the luck or he would not have spent a thousand francs on a trifle of jade. Is it not so? *Mais oui.* That admirable Professor Johns would call it a problem in—um—the criminal psychology."

"You have a description of this Jules Lacôte?" Samuels asked, and his eyes wandered to the sheeted figure on the couch.

"Oh, several, monsieur," and Flique chuckled. "That he is tall and blond; that he is dark and sallow and hook-nosed; and that he is fat and the color of blood. Ah, those descriptions, M. le Deputy!" and Flique chuckled again. "What are they? I ask you, as one man of intelligence of another. The merchant of antiques had a bullet in his head. He died raving that he had been shot by a man to whom he had sold a phœnix of jade the day before—that was all. Poor fellow!"

"But what about le Balafré and Bec?" Samuels persisted. "You must have got something out of them."

Flique smiled indulgently. "Monsieur does not understand. Le Balafré and Cicéron Bec are not to be given

the sentence of death. Instead, they are to go to *l'Ile du Diable* until life is finished. But they were clever ones and perhaps they will escape. And if they do their fingers will itch. They will itch for what is left of those million francs, and they will itch—*mon dieu,* they will *burn* like ten suns for the throat of that Jules Lacôte. Messieurs," Flique's voice became a whisper, a thin thread of a whisper, "messieurs, not for all the francs between earth and heaven would I be the betrayer of la Balafré and Cicéron Bec now they have escaped from that *l'Ile du Diable.* It is an awkward place, that, *mes amis!* It is an ante-chamber of hell. But you have heard, yes? And now, M. le Deputy, do you perceive why those little ones did not describe to me that infamous Lacôte?"

I tried to tell myself what they would be like, those two men who had come out of the black reek of the French Guiana penal colony. Their attitudes towards life, I mean, for that is about all that matters in a man. They would still be the shape and substance of men, but there would be a corruption inside, that corruption of spirit which exceeds in horror anything that can happen to the flesh. I was glad I was not Jules Lacôte.

"You've been chasing jade phœnixes ever since?" Samuels wanted to know.

"*Eh bien,* I have seen many of them, monsieur," Flique beamed, twirling his mustache. "We of *la Sureté* are the thorough ones, I assure you."

"What brought you here?"

Flique had been waiting for the question. Diving into his pocket, he drew forth a wallet and extracted from it a sheet of note-paper which he unfolded and presented to Samuels with a bow. A clipping cut from the classified columns of a French newspaper was pasted to the sheet.

"I can't read French," Samuels said irritably.

"M. l'Antiquaire will translate," Flique murmured, and Samuels passed the paper to me.

A typewritten legend at the top of the sheet indicated that the clipping had been cut from the *Clairon du Matin*, a Marseilles newspaper. I read the legend and then, with astonishment, the clipping.

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

"If you are looking for a jade phœnix that was bought in Marseilles twenty-five years ago, you may find it in the home of Mr. Dan Parados, San Lucas Island, California."

Flique beamed agreeably at us whilst we digested this piece of information. I imagine he knew we would need a minute or so to get it down. Samuels took the paper out of my hand, stared at it, folded it slowly, and tucked it into one of his vest pockets.

"I'll keep this, if you don't mind," he said in a voice that had lost its timbre.

"*Certainement,*" and Flique bowed. "I have many more. That notice has appeared in every issue of the *Clairon* and two other journals of Marseilles for six months, M. le Deputy."

"When did those convicts escape?"

"It is almost seven months ago."

"And their escape was in the headlines all over the world?" Flique nodded and Samuels went on. "This notice went into print a month later. That would give it plenty of time to get over there from California."

Samuels took a quick turn up and down the room and I lighted a cigarette. Kirk's hands were opening and shutting again as if he were trying to grasp at something. Flique, perched on one corner of the writing table, looked like a benevolent plump deity indulging the whims of mankind. His pink-cheeked amiability irritated me. I wanted to push him off.

"Not a bad stunt," Samuels went on. "Those fellows

would be pretty sure to get hold of one of their home town papers as time went on. Have you any idea who inserted it, Flique?"

"*Non,* my friend."

"You made inquiry?"

"Must I remind monsieur that I am the principal agent of *la Sureté?*" Flique asked with dignity. And then: "*Aux bureaux des journaux.* The money was sent—as you would say—"

"Anonymously," I supplied.

"*Précisément!*"

Samuels strode over to the couch. Drawing back the sheet, he looked down into the face it had covered.

"Is this Jules Lacôte, Flique?" he demanded abruptly, looking up.

Flique's agreeable expression did not change, but he hesitated an instant before he answered.

"I do not know, my friend."

"Assuming that it is, do you think Bec and le Balafré killed him?"

"That, also, I do not know."

"What do you think, then?" Samuels persisted irritably.

"Monsieur, I do not know. I have the open mind—not the opinion. It is better so until one does *know.* Am I not right? But from what I have learned of those little ones, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec, M. Parados was not killed by them, unless—"

"Why not?"

"Because a devil lives in their hearts. After twenty-five years on *l'Ile du Diable* could it be otherwise, I ask you? Those two would not content themselves with a bullet in the heart of the *espèce de vache* who sent them there. They are artists, those two, M. l'Deputy, and they will have labored upon their masterpiece those twenty-five years. The death of Jules Lacôte would be an awkward one for that person, I assure you, and it would express

the peculiar genius of le Balafré, The Scarred One, and Cicéron Bec,—unless—"

"Yes?"

"They had not time and it was *nécessaire* to finish him quickly."

"That's right. Maybe they had to. But see here. That notice brought you to San Lucas. Wouldn't they figure on your people seeing it and looking it up? I should think they'd want to put themselves on the other side of the earth."

"I do not know," Flique said, shrugging. "It is a gamble. I take the chance. Perhaps they will, also. Which has supremacy in their hearts, fear of the principal agent of *la Sureté,* or lust for vengeance? Messieurs," and Flique bowed humbly, "I have the opinion it is the latter."

"Well, maybe. I wish to God I knew who paid for that advertisement. What do you know about Lacôte's parents?"

"His mother was French. Of his father we know nothing. It is thought that in his youth Lacôte served in a French arsenal, but we do not know."

"Nobody knows anything about Parados' life up to his coming to America twenty-five years ago—not even his wife," Samuels continued. "He may have invented that Greek father. Flique, I've a hunch Parados is your man, Lacôte!"

"You assume too much, *mon ami.* Also, you do not know that madame has the ignorance of monsieur's past."

"That's right," Samuels muttered, running his hand over his head. "Yes, that's right." He took a quick step up and down. "The Brent girl, Annersley, Grainger, Bec and le Balafré, and now Mrs. Parados. She'll have a good many millions to spend, too. God bless our happy home. I wonder who'll be the next?"

Flique chuckled. "Perhaps Anatole Flique or M. le

Deputy—*qui sait?* My friend, it is the second hour of the new day. Shall we retire?"

Samuels tossed his cigar into the fireplace. "Good idea. Kirk is going back to headquarters. I'll bunk down in the boathouse."

I hadn't the heart to ask him if he had changed his mind about Caroline.

XIII

THE BROKEN GOD

I WANTED a breath of air before turning in and I left by the patio window. Samuels locked it behind me. The wind had dropped, but there still was an edge to it and I inhaled the salty freshness blown into my face. A path crossed the patio. I followed it, pondering over what I had learned.

There is a fatalism about the linking up of tragic events which one would not expect to have anything in common that argues a malevolent direction of the undercurrents of life. Here were a twenty-five-year-old bank robbery in a French city, the purchase of a jade phœnix with a history thirty centuries long, two men escaped from a French penal colony, and Dan Parados with a bullet in his heart . . . to say nothing of the phœnix Parados had lost two hours before he was killed, the thirty-five-cent price ticket clutched in his hand, and the hatred he had bred in his own house. Were all these events parts of a sinister pattern hidden in shadow?

Coming out of the patio, I thought I might as well go as far as the edge of the cliff that looked down into the cove. A dark shape in front of me defined itself as a pergola built on the edge of the cliff. I was perhaps fifty feet away from it when voices—Celia's and Annersley's, I thought—became audible to me, and I was turning back when Celia's voice, poignant with dismay, pulled me up.

"Oh, Claude, how could you do that?"

"Celia, Celia!" Annersley pleaded.

The girl began to weep. "I wouldn't have believed it of you! Oh, Claude—"

"But Celia, dear—" Annersley broke off. "Sssh!" he muttered, "There's some one coming."

But I was already on my way back and I quickened my step, picturing Celia clinging to Annersley in fear. Her outcry had been too sharply piercing to have been caused by any casual remark and I wondered what he had said to her. Turning the matter over in my mind, I came around to the outside stair and ran up to the roof where my ponderings were cut short by the discovery that the breeze had slammed to the window of my room, automatically locking it. I was shut out.

"What an idiot I am!" I muttered. "Why didn't I think of that before I went down?"

I did not feel like rousing the servants or appealing to Annersley and Celia, and I was wondering how I was going to get out of the predicament I had got myself into without making a fool of myself, when I remembered the billiard room window. It was quite possible that the general consternation following upon the discovery of Parados' body had caused it to be overlooked by whoever was responsible for locking up the house—Miss Jahries, probably. I ran down the stair. To my relief the window was open and I stepped softly into the room, latching the window behind me.

Half way across the room which was in darkness, I paused with a prickling sensation at the base of my neck. There is nothing comparable with the feeling that comes upon one at such a moment. You are in a dark room and you believe yourself to be alone. And then, for no definable reason, you know that you are not. I had heard nothing, I had seen nothing, yet I was as positive as I was of my own existence that some one beside myself was in the room. The black air quivered with that peculiar sentient aliveness which comes from contact with a personality other than one's own.

My first thought was of the Brent collection, but I had

already brushed against some of the pictures and the pottery was still on the billiard table. No, it was my impression that the intruder, whoever he was, was after something else. I was not afraid, but I did not move. I wanted the other to make some slight noise that would betray his exact whereabouts. Whatever promising action occurred to me then I would take. None had occurred to me yet. The man might be armed, probably he was armed, but he could not see me any more than I could see him.

It could not be Annersley or Celia. Nor Caroline. I should have known if it were Caroline. Miss Jahries, Flique, Mrs. Parados, Johns, Grainger—one of these, perhaps, but for some obscure reason I did not think so. And then I thought of le Balafré and Cicéron Bec and my blood turned cold. The very ring of those two names had the peculiar deadliness of a knife cast by a practiced hand. I could almost feel an icy thinness sliding between my ribs. Then I pulled myself together. This wouldn't do. Le Balafré and Bec were probably on the other side of the earth by this, as Samuels had said, or hidden in the slums of their native Marseilles. Likely enough there was no one in the room at all. Likely enough—

And then, quite distinctly, I heard the sound I had been waiting for.

What it was I did not know. The soft thud of a slippered foot, perhaps. But it gave me the impetus I needed. The intruder was making for the hall door. Its location was fairly definitely fixed in my mind and I let myself go, intending to switch on the light. If I had had a clear course we should probably have reached the door together, but there happened to be a chair in my way. My foot caught in one of its legs and I pitched headlong to the floor.

The impact with which I came down was pretty severe and some ten seconds elapsed before I was able to climb

onto my feet. A door which had softly opened as softly closed. It was the hall door and as I threw myself upon it a key turned in the lock on the other side. I tried the handle. The door held.

Furious at myself, I switched on the light. The Brent collection was intact, apparently. My eyes then fell upon the door that connected the room I was in with the library and I hurried towards it. The door was unlocked and I pushed into the room beyond, hoping that the door between the library and the hall would be, also. The darkness was heavy with the presence of death and I found myself holding my breath and shivering. Exploratory fingers were at my throat and eyes. My ears and nostrils and lungs were filled with the harrowing ectoplasmic fogginess my overwrought imagination was making of the confined sea air.

To my dismay, the door was locked, but I had half expected it would be. Samuels would have the key in his pocket. All chance of getting a glimpse of the intruder was gone now. I switched on the light and the shadows vanished into themselves, taking with them the ghostly heaviness that had deadened the air. Feeling better, I glanced across the room at the sheeted figure on the couch. Parados had died as he had lived. An impulse to turn down the sheet and look into his dead face carried me half way across the room before I conquered it. I turned away with a shudder. The man was dead in the flesh only; the evil he had done still lived.

Putting out the light, I returned to the billiard room wondering what I should do. My disinclination to rouse the house or appeal to Annersley and Celia was as keen as ever. It occurred to me then that some door or other lower window of the house might have been inadvertently left open. I would try all of them, Miss Jahries' window excepted. If all of them were fastened, I would rouse Miss Jahries.

The temptation to look at the portrait of Caroline's grandmother before I switched off the light was irresistible. There was even more of Caroline in the misty expression Seddons had caught than I had thought and it came upon me overwhelmingly that I could ask of life nothing finer than the privilege of growing old with such a person. I suppose that is a queer way of putting what I felt.

It so happened that the first door I tried was open and I found myself, much to my relief, in the kitchen. Either Annersley and Celia had gone out that way, or there had been a good deal of negligence in the house that night. The possibility that Annersley and Celia might have used the door made me decide to leave it open. A bolt was the method of fastening it, I saw. Walls and cabinets of gleaming white leaped out at me as I pressed the light switch, then I sent them back into darkness again and passed into the hall, where a ceiling lamp burned. I looked into the dining-room, the drawing-room, and the sun room, as a matter of course, but there was no one about. It occurred to me that it might be wise to rouse Flique and tell him of my experience, but I decided against such a course. Flique would not want his slumbers disturbed, and likely enough nothing would be gained by demanding an immediate accounting of every one in the house. Morning would do as well.

As I reached the head of the stair believing that I had had a pretty full night, one way or another, I was attracted by a thread of light beneath the door nearest me. To whom the different bedrooms belonged I had not the remotest idea, but I at once concluded that the occupant of this particular room was the person who had locked me in the billiard room. Just what to do I could not decide. I had not seen the intruder's face—I could prove nothing. The Brent collection was intact, so far as I knew, and the intruder might argue that he—or she—had had as

much right in the room as I had. This reflection decided me. I would go to bed and find out who occupied the room in the morning.

But as I softly entered my room, which was at the head of the corridor, and felt for the light switch, a door latch clicked. A nervous excitement was upon me and I held myself rigid for a moment; then I cautiously edged one eye around the frame of the door. To my astonishment, Miss Jahries thrust her head turtle-fashion out of the door of the room I had been speculating about, turned it swiftly right and left, and completely emerged from the room. A light switched clicked, a door closed. Miss Jahries stood in the attitude of one who listens intently, then she ran swiftly down the stair.

"That's not her room," I muttered in perplexity. "I wonder whose it is. And I wonder what she was doing in it at this hour of the morning."

The room would not be Annersley's, since he was downstairs, nor Celia's, for the same reason. I could not imagine Flique receiving middle-aged spinsters in his night clothes, and if the room was Mrs. Parados', Miss Jahries would not have left it in that surreptitious manner. Caroline remained, but I could not see Miss Jahries paying Caroline a call at this hour of the morning.

Footsteps on the stair became audible a moment later—Miss Jahries' had been noiseless—and as I glanced around the door Celia and Annersley ascended into view, hand in hand, their faces somber. At the top of the stair they embraced tenderly until Celia pushed her lover back.

"Good night, Claude."

Her voice expressed what a woman feels for a man only once in her life. I could hardly believe it was Celia.

"Good night, dear."

She ran swiftly along the hall and turned into the east wing. Annersley stood where she had left him for at least half a minute, staring in the direction in which she

had gone; then he moved towards and pushed into the room Miss Jahries had come out of five minutes before!

I had been waiting to see what room he would go into, but I had not seriously considered the possibility that it would be the one Miss Jahries had come out of, and I shut my own door more bewildered than ever. Miss Jahries and Annersley were allies, I had supposed. To find Miss Jahries enacting the appearance of something else took all the starch out of my theories. Had Miss Jahries been seeking for something that Annersley did not want her to find, I wondered? It looked very much like it. I discarded my belief that it was she who had locked me in the billiard room. If it had been, she would have gone to her room until I was definitely out of the way.

"And now Miss Jahries," I muttered. "I wonder who'll be the next?"

That had been Samuels' phrase, I remembered, and I went to bed with it echoing in my brain. Contrary to my expectations, I presently fell asleep.

I awoke around seven. It took me a minute or so to orientate myself; then I sprang out of bed and went to the window. The vivid blues and whites of sea and sky made me think of turquoises washed in the tears of Venus and suspended from the four corners of heaven. I don't belong to the boosting tribe, either. The Gut was alive again, but it had not reached that pitch of demoniac fury which had been so impressive the night before. The brilliant beauty of the morning made it difficult to think of the fantastic horror of the previous night as a reality that must absorb our attention until it was explained.

Flique was in the sun room smoking one of his small cigars and laboriously reading an American newspaper.

"Bon jour, mon ami," and he beamed up at me. "You are early."

"Not so early as you are," I reminded him.

"C'est vrai, but I am Anatole Flique," and his tone implied that therein lay a difference. "That was a tragic affair last night, M. l'Antiquaire."

I nodded soberly. "Do you think Samuels will be able to solve it?"

Flique twirled his mustache. "An excellent fellow, that Samuel, but he has not the inward eye." Flique shrugged, his expression doleful. "It is the philosophy that is the gift of good wine that he lacks—that you all lack. And when I speak of the philosophy for your policeman the journals make merry. A curious people, indeed! There is immortality in your cup, but you dare not lift it. *C'est dommage!* I met an excellent fellow with a sad eye in that New York. 'What is your—um—favorite beverage?' I inquired. Can you tell me what he said, that unfortunate?"

"Coca-cola, perhaps," I grinned.

"M. l'Antiquaire," Flique continued with emotion, "it was the malt milk." He spread his plump hands. "And yet you have built an empire! *C'est incroyable!*"

"Most of it was built before we took to malted milk," I assured him.

"It must be so. But enough! How did you rest?"

"Well. How about yourself?"

"As a little child. It is always so. But I was up with the lark, for I desired to observe the—what is it?—eucalyptus trees."

I knew what he meant. "One of them slashed Grainger across the cheek."

"Précisément! Only it did not."

"He was lying, then?"

"It is a house of lies, M. l'Antiquaire. But you, also, have something to tell. I see it in your eye."

He listened attentively as I told him, now and then nodding in his animated way.

"Yes, yes, you did well. It is clear that you are a man

of intelligence. An extraordinary woman, that Mademoiselle Jahries. But come, I have something to show you."

Flique led me down the hall to the library door, which he unlocked, and across the room to the sheeted figure on the couch. My curiosity was at fever heat as, with a dramatic gesture, he flung the sheet back.

"Voila!" he exclaimed.

On the breast of the body lay the jade phœnix—broken in two.

XIV

MANNING HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

I STARED at it, with my mouth open; then I turned to Flique, who was thoroughly enjoying my astonishment.

"When did you find it?"

"But an hour ago. A curiosity brought me to the body and I lifted the sheet." He twirled his mustache. "The curiosity of Anatole Flique is the greatness of Anatole Flique, my friend."

"Well," I said, "this explains my adventure in the billiard room."

"Oui. But do you perceive the significance of what you see?"

"That the phœnix is broken?"

"Précisément! That remarkable bird was the deity of M. Parados. His goddess of luck—his sacred talisman. Mrs. Parados has said so. It is stolen from him. He is killed. It is returned—broken. You see?"

"Surely you are not telling me Parados lost his life because he first lost his lucky piece?" I demanded incredulously.

"Non, non. It is the one who stole it who thinks that. Do you not see? He has the simple mind—the primitive, as you say. He stole monsieur's god because he hated monsieur, perhaps. Monsieur is killed. His primitive mind is satisfied, and he returns monsieur's god—broken. There is a word, M. l'Antiquaire—that imbecile English!" and Flique snapped his finger impatiently at me.

"You mean that he returned it broken to symbolize Parados' broken life?"

"Ah, that is it!"

"But surely Parados was killed by the person—or persons—who stole the phœnix," I asserted. "And doesn't the introduction of the phœnix into the tragedy suggest that your friends le Balafré and Bec brought it about?"

"You assume too much, *mon ami.* Perhaps those little ones killed monsieur, but if they did they would not have stolen that phœnix first and returned it afterwards. *Mon dieu,* no. But we do not know that they killed him. We do not know who killed him. But we shall know—I assure you of that, M. l'Antiquaire! You and I will work together for the truth, yes?"

"Whatever it is!" I answered fervently. "I'm not afraid of the truth."

I was on the point of picking the phœnix up when Flique stopped me.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "M. Samuel will desire to inspect it for the fingerprints before it is touched."

The phœnix was an excellent bit of work and I looked down at it with that disturbing sense of the impermanence of human life which the inspection of antique art always arouses in me. I should have resented the breaking of it much more keenly than I did had I not been preoccupied with the significance of its theft and return. The artist's conception of the fabulous bird had led him to invest the piece of jade with the form of an eagle with folded wings perched on a rock. It was perhaps ten inches long and as thick as a man's wrist, and it had an air of Socratic wisdom which its broken condition did not appear to affect.

Samuels came in just then and Flique introduced him to the discovery he had made. The deputy had not slept over well, I thought; the lines at the corners of his eyes deepened and lengthened as he listened to what Flique had to say.

"And so, monsieur, we have another little mystery

around the corner," Flique finished, beaming. "But M. l'Antiquaire has an adventure for you, also."

Muttering one of his imprecations, Samuels spread a handkerchief over the two halves of the phœnix and carried them to the writing table where the light was better. He then went over them carefully with the lens.

"There are none?" Flique inquired.

"Don't see any," Samuels grunted disgustedly, and carefully put the phœnix away in one of the drawers. "All right, Hunt."

I described again how I had stumbled upon Celia and Annersley in the pergola, my experience in the billiard room, and Miss Jahries' surreptitious departure from Annersley's room.

"Annersley—Jahries," Samuels muttered in perplexity, when I had done. "You are sure it was Annersley's room she came out of?"

"Annersley went into it not five minutes later," I assured him dryly.

"Yet they alibied each other," Samuels knitted his brows. "She must have been looking for something. What do you get out of it, Flique?"

The little man shrugged. "You could ask her, M. le Deputy."

"I'll do that, believe me!" he assured us. "Here's a notion, Flique. Annersley may have some hold on the Jahries woman. If he has he's probably forced her to put up that alibi yarn. See what I mean? Annersley's hold is down on paper, say, so she went through his stuff while he was petting that Ferris girl in the pergola, thinking she might be able to get her hands on it. If I'm right we are on a clear track. Annersley killed Parados." Samuels suddenly struck the desk with his fist. "By God, Flique, I believe that's the answer."

"You assume too much, my friend. It is the maze of circumstantial evidence that we are in—we are lost!

Last night it is Mademoiselle Brent, then it is M. Annersley, and then it is those little ones, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec. This morning it is M. Annersley again. In a little while it will be—*qui sait?*" Flique wagged a plump finger in Samuels' irritated face. "Monsieur, we shall discover other evidence and suspect other members of this unfortunate house. And perhaps you will make the arrest and it will not be the right one; and again you will make the arrest and still it will not be the right one. That is my prophecy, as you say—well, we shall see. I implore you to be circumspect and to have the immense patience. We shall triumph in the end. Of that I assure you."

"Pretty sure how things are going, aren't you?" Samuels inquired ironically.

"I am much experienced, *mon ami!*"

"So am I. Well, we'll have Miss Jahries in."

"Before the breakfast?" Flique exclaimed, flinging out his hands. "It is not possible to have an interrogation on an empty stomach."

"So the English detective story writers tell us," Samuels grinned, and he pulled on the bell rope by the door.

Grainger answered the summons. I was struck again by the somber strength graven into his weather-beaten face and the haunting familiarity of his eyes. The livid scar across his cheek looked angrier, I thought.

"Tell Miss Jahries to come," Samuels said abruptly.

"Yes, sir."

He had got as far as the door when Flique stopped him.

"Ah, Grainger."

The man turned. "Yes, sir?"

"How is your face this morning, my good fellow?" Flique inquired solicitously.

The red slash darkened. "It's some better, thank you, M. Flique," Grainger answered coolly.

"*Bien!* But you are sure, you are sure, my good Grainger, that it was the branch of a eucalyptus tree?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not a cypress?"

"No, sir."

"Nor a palm?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure, my good Grainger, it was not *this?*"

Diving abruptly behind the writing table, Flique brought to light a riding quirt which he cracked in midair. Its effect was startling. Fury blasted the graven dignity of Grainger's face, the slash throbbed like a pulse and inflamed the whole of his left cheek. And then as quickly as he had lost control of himself he regained it again.

"I don't know what you are talking about, sir," he said in level tones.

Flique bowed. "I thank you, Grainger. You may proceed."

But Samuels had a word to say, it seemed.

"What about that rose you dropped into the waste-paper basket last night, Grainger?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Grainger answered in the same level tones.

"All right." Samuels nodded, and Grainger went out. "Lies like a gentleman," he commented briefly.

"Perhaps he is that, monsieur," Flique mused.

"You certainly got under his skin with that riding quirt," Samuels admitted. "Where'd you find it?"

"It was on top of that safe," Flique replied. "We did not notice it last night. Monsieur may have cast it there in anger."

"How do you know Parados used it on him?"

Flique chuckled. "I did not know. But I did not think the branch of a eucalyptus tree would so behave. They are a gentle tree. They have not the spring. And then I found this whip, and I remembered the excellent Grainger's eyes."

"His eyes—what do you mean?"

"Ah, monsieur, that is my little idea. We shall see first if I am right—then I shall tell you."

"Men have been shot for less than a slash across the face," Samuels muttered.

Miss Jahries appeared at that instant. Her austere, colorless face and tragic eyes were even less promising than Grainger's graven quietness, and I didn't expect Samuels to get much out of her.

"Miss Jahries," he began abruptly, "you were seen coming out of Mr. Annersley's room around half-past two this morning. Mr. Annersley was out at the time. What were you doing there?"

Miss Jahries' expression did not change and I wondered if Grainger had not dropped her a word of warning.

"Who saw me?" she inquired.

Her dark eyes passed scornfully from one to another of us and I began to feel uncomfortable.

"That doesn't matter," Samuels answered sharply. "What were you doing in Annersley's room?"

"I have not admitted that I was in Mr. Annersley's room," Miss Jahries countered.

"We know that you were." Samuels' tone was impatient. "If you don't answer my question I'll call Annersley in and ask him."

"I suggest that you do that, Mr. Samuels," Miss Jahries said coolly. "I should enjoy hearing what Mr. Annersley has to say."

"Will you answer my question?" Samuels thundered.

"I haven't anything to say," Miss Jahries replied colorlessly.

"That distresses me," Flique interposed tactfully. "You know a little, and you are keeping it back. Everybody knows a little and is keeping it back. Am I not right? If we knew the little that everybody knew would we not have the whole? *Alors,* mademoiselle, will you not help us?"

Miss Jahries' eyes warmed and I thought Flique had broken through her reserve, but the look was gone in a twinkling and she shook her head positively.

"I haven't anything to say, M. Flique." Her voice was colorless again. And then to Samuels: "Mrs. Parados suggests that you have your meals in the house while you are on the island."

"Thanks." Samuels' tone was dry, but appreciative. "That solves one of my problems."

Miss Jahries then informed us that breakfast would be ready in a moment or two and took her departure.

"That woman could tell us everything we want to know, if she'd open her mouth," Samuels declared vehemently. "Annersley is holding a club over her head."

Flique shrugged. "Perhaps she has some of the truth, my friend, but not all of it. This affair is too—um—inclusive? Yes, that is the word. Parados was an evil man. The ramifi— Name of a pipe, what is that word, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"Ramifications," I grinned.

"Ah," Flique beamed. "You are as my right eye! The ramifications of his life were immense and we are misled. But we shall come to the heart of the matter, I assure you," and Flique twirled his mustache.

In my opinion there is a persuasive friendliness about the fragrance of coffee properly percolated and hot cakes done to a turn and bacon sizzling in its own juice that has done more for the cause of domestic harmony than all the good advice penned on that delicate subject. But its potency was lacking on the present occasion which, however, was not precisely one of domestic discord, and we took our places in an atmosphere frigid and silent. There were seven of us: Mrs. Parados, Celia and Caroline, Flique, Samuels, Annersley and myself. Johns, it appeared, had breakfast at the tower. Flique made the meal bearable. Tucking his napkin under his chin, he disposed

of his grapefruit and buckled down to his hot cakes and bacon with an ardor that stimulated our appetites.

"Lum We is the brightest jewel in the crown of madame," he announced, wiping his mustache with his napkin.

"He's well paid," Mrs. Parados said dryly.

"His reward is not of this earth, madame," Flique chuckled through a mouthful of pancake, and our appetites improved.

Caroline, who sat opposite me, was in fair spirits and I caught her eyes through the steam from my coffee as I lifted the cup. It gave them that misty look I had seen in Grandmother Brent's, but there was just a touch of derision in the blue deepness behind and I was glad. Evidently, she had inherited more than her eyes from Grandmother Brent. Caroline began to smile in that devastating way she had, then, and I realized that I had put my coffee down untouched.

"Some one was burning incense this morning," she said. "I noticed it when I opened my window. It seemed to come from that building at the side of the house. I wonder if it was Lum We?"

The building to which Caroline alluded—the garage and servants' quarters, I supposed—was visible from the east window of the breakfast room.

"Likely enough," Mrs. Parados said sharply. "He has been forbidden to use it. What time did you notice the incense?"

"Just before dawn," Caroline replied. "I didn't sleep very well. But it didn't bother me. Please don't think I minded. I was interested in it, that's all."

"Who forbids him to use incense?" Samuels asked.

"My husband," Mrs. Parados answered. "If Lum We had any ill feeling towards Dan it would be on that account. Mr. Annersley mentioned something at dinner last night."

"Yes," Annersley cut in, "I heard Mr. Parados tell him he'd break every bone in his body if he brought any more of the stuff into the house. Perhaps he was referring to Lum We's incense."

"Dan hated the stuff," Mrs. Parados said.

"Lum We has an ancestral tablet in his room," Celia informed us. "He showed it to me. His father died two years ago and it's supposed to be the house of his departed spirit. He burns incense in front of the tablet."

Celia had been toying listlessly with her grapefruit ever since we had sat down, greatly to Annersley's distress, I had thought. His relief was immense as she had looked up, brightening.

"Man has three souls, according to the Chinese," Annersley explained. "At death one of them goes into the ancestral tablet prepared for it. The ritual of the tablet is a pretty important matter with them, I understand."

"It is life and death and all eternity, monsieur," Flique observed solemnly. "China lives for her dead. A curious people! But this is an excellent coffee, madame."

"All the world is curious to M. Flique," Celia drawled banteringly.

"Not beauty, mademoiselle," Flique beamed, wagging a plump finger at her. "That is the goddess of all men. *J'ai raison, n'est-ce pas,* M. l'Antiquaire."

I looked at Caroline and nodded.

All of us were glad to break away from the table, I imagine. Caroline and I had a word together.

"We might look over the island as soon as I'm free," I suggested. "We could probably manage to see a good deal of it in a couple of hours."

Samuels would be having something to say to Annersley about Miss Jahries and that was what was on my mind, as I did not want to miss anything that might have a bearing on the case.

"Oh, I'd love to!" Caroline exclaimed, and her face

lighted up. "It should be beautiful from the top of the hill. And I do so want to get out of this dreadful house."

"You've stood it pretty well," I said stoutly. "Grandmother Brent would be proud of you."

She had moved nearer the window and the sun was doing astonishing things to her hair. I should have said something foolish if Samuels' assertive voice had not cut across the surface of my mind.

"Will you come into the library, Mr. Annersley?"

"All right," Annersley answered from the hall door.

"Afterwards?" I whispered to Caroline.

"Of course. I'll be up on the slope somewhere," and with a little nod that churned me up inside she fled through the door.

I had come to look upon myself as a sort of Watson to the Holmes of Anatole Flique and I trailed him and Samuels and Annersley into the library, quietly closing the door behind us. Annersley gave me a black look, but Samuels made no objection to my presence and I stationed myself by the fireplace.

"Mr. Annersley, what is there between you and Miss Jahries?" Samuels began in his abrupt way.

"I don't understand you." Annersley's cheek bones began to redden.

"I put it plainly enough. Have you got some hold on her?"

"You are going pretty far, aren't you, Samuels?" Annersley's voice was husky.

"Not so far as I'm prepared to go, by a damn' sight," Samuels said vehemently. "Answer the question!"

"You talk like a cheap movie!" Annersley didn't quite succeed in making his tone contemptuous. "Certainly not! I don't know anything about Miss Jahries!"

"No?" Samuels was himself again. "What was she doing in your room last night, then?"

"In my room—" Annersley stopped sharply, clenching his fists, and I could feel the terror beating upon the inside of his breast.

"While you were downstairs with the Ferris girl," Samuels drawled.

Annersley by a stupendous effort recovered himself.

"Oh, that's what you mean, is it?" The words had no meaning; his eyes were impersonal in their regard of Samuels. "Well, I don't know what she was doing there."

"Did you know she was there?"

"No, I didn't."

"Do you expect me to believe you don't know what she was after?"

"Please yourself about that. You might ask Miss Jahries."

On the whole, Samuels conducted himself rather well, I thought.

"That's all," he said abruptly. "Sorry to have bothered you."

Annersley's relief was more obvious than he intended it to be and I felt sorry for him. I felt sorry for Celia, too. They would be decent people to know. Annersley's hand trembled as he reached for the door handle. He jerked the door open and Manning, who was on the other side of it, her hand on the knob and, I expect, her ear to the keyhole, pitched into his arms. Annersley pulled the frightened girl on to her feet, his eyes white with fury.

"Is this house full of spies?" he shouted.

Shoving Manning aside, he flung himself into the hall and his feet thudded down its carpeted length until a door slammed.

"What were you doing out there, Manning?" Samuels demanded sternly.

Manning began to weep, and Manning in tears left one

with a sense of divine incompetence. I wondered if silk stockings wouldn't improve her, for I am always trying to make the best of a bad job.

"You were listening!" Samuels charged.

Manning swallowed some of her tears. "I wasn't, sir," she sobbed. "I was just coming in to tell you something and I had my hand on the door knob and he jerked me in."

"Mademoiselle might have fallen through the keyhole," Flique observed solemnly.

"It isn't big enough, sir," Manning said earnestly, twisting her apron.

I decided that nothing, not even silk stockings, could improve Manning.

"Well, what were you coming to tell us?" Samuels wanted to know.

Manning's lumpy face quivered. "I don't like to do it, sir, but with the terrible goings on here and everybody being suspected it seems like my duty. He's as nice a gentleman as I ever did after. I'm over there on a Friday and when I'm done there's always fifty cents or a book or a box of candy or a pair of silk stockings for me. Not that I read, except my Bible, and candy isn't good for me, but I'm saving, sir, and it's very nice of him—"

"Mademoiselle is saving the stockings?" Flique inquired sorrowfully.

"Indeed I am, sir. Cotton is plenty good enough for me. If there were less silk stockings worn in the world—"

"What are you talking about?" Samuels shouted.

Manning quivered again. "Professor Johns, sir."

"Well, what about him?"

"They had a dreadful quarrel, sir."

"Johns had—with whom?"

Manning glanced timidly towards the sheeted figure on the couch.

"*Him,* sir," she whispered, "in this room."

"When?"

"A long time ago, sir. It must have been four or five months ago." Manning untwisted her apron. "I remember it so well because—because it was so *awful,* sir." Manning hung lovingly on that last word and began to work with her apron again.

"Awful—what do you mean? You overheard something?"

"I didn't mean to, sir, but I'd been told to dust down the hall walls and—"

"You listened," Samuels supplied grimly. "You listened because you couldn't help it. That's fine. Now tell us what you heard."

Manning was reassured and she neglected her apron to make little confiding gestures with her hands.

"The door was shut and I couldn't hear what they were quarreling about. It was just a word here and there I got at first—*you* know, sir," and Manning's nod implied that Samuels had done his share of keyhole eavesdropping. "Then all at once Professor Johns laughed. He laughed in a terrible way—like his heart was breaking in two. And he said in a terrible voice, 'That's the one thing you cannot do, Parados!' Mr. Parados laughed. His laugh was terrible, too, but different. It was like—oh, I don't know, sir," and Manning sought a simile. "Like the devil laughing on judgment day, maybe. 'What'll you do about it?' Mr. Parados shouted. They dropped their voices then and what with my dust mop slithering up and down and not trying to listen—not *really* trying to listen, sir—I didn't hear any more for a little while. It was just as if they'd worn themselves out. And then all at once Professor Johns spoke up again."

Manning paused to seek another simile and perhaps to whet our appetites, for she knew we were hanging onto every word she uttered.

"His voice sounded like it came from a dead man," she whispered, clasping her hands. "All creepy and cold it was, sir, but clear as a little bell, and I didn't have to listen hard to what he said. It was something like this: 'You've destroyed a good deal in your life, Dan Parados, but you'll not do that. I've given twenty years of my life to it. You are not going to pull it down.'"

Manning stopped and we gave her the applause of our silence.

"Miss Jahries came into the hall then, sir, and spoke to me about my work and I didn't hear any more," the girl went on, twisting her apron again, "but just as she went away Professor Johns rushed out of the library and hurried down the hall to the front door and let himself out. He looked terrible. His face was all white and twitchy. I hardly knew it was him. He's always so nice and neat and considerate—even if he does frighten me sometimes."

"But, mademoiselle," Flique expostulated, spreading his hands, "that cannot be. Does he not give you the bonbons and stockings of silk! Come, my little one, so kindly a patron—how can he frighten you?"

"Oh, dear me, what am I saying?" Manning cried, and her lumpy face quivered like pale lemon jelly. "I don't mean he *frightens* me. It's just that he knows so much—about *everything*. It's like a fire inside of him—and it makes me feel so *little*. And, oh, dear, I just couldn't refuse the things he gives me if I wanted to. It's just that he's so *wonderful* that he frightens me. And please don't tell him I told you. I don't know what I'd do if he knew. I'm a good girl—"

"It could not be otherwise, mademoiselle," Flique assured her gravely. "He frightens you, but he does not frighten you; that is clear. Also, that he is the kindly patron. You did well, *ma fille,* eh, M. le Deputy?"

"Fine!" Samuels agreed grimly. "That's all you've got to tell us, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Let us know if you hear anything else."

Manning left us, rejoicing in a sense of duty well done.

"There are many such mesdemoiselles in your country, M. l'Antiquaire?" Flique inquired delicately.

"We need our Mannings to set off our Carolines and Celias," I informed him.

Flique bowed politely. *"C'est vrai, mon ami.* I am rebuked."

Samuels took up the telephone and pressed one of the row of buttons on the desk.

"Is this Professor Johns? . . . Samuels speaking. You might step over to the library. . . . Thanks."

XV

". . . UNTIL THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT"

WHILE we were waiting for Professor Johns I strolled over to one of the bookcases and began a study of the titles. My championship of Caroline was the only shadow of excuse I had for being in the room at all and I wanted to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. There is nothing quite like a well-stocked bookcase for taking the obtrusiveness out of a man.

"Monsieur has the ample choice, eh?" Flique inquired with a chuckle. "But did I not tell you? Now it is this Professor Johns. Next it will be—that admirable Lum We, perhaps," and Flique shrugged.

"Why Lum We?" Samuels demanded savagely. It was clear that his nerves were on edge.

"Come, my friend! You heard what was said. Did not Monsieur Parados forbid Lum We to burn incense to his ancestors?"

"Do you call that a motive?"

"It may be the strongest we have yet discovered, M. le Deputy. Have I not said China lives for her dead? *Eh bien,* we shall see. Perhaps Lum We is but another of the little mysteries. That Professor Johns has an excellent alibi."

"I'm sick of alibis," Samuels declared wrathfully. "They don't mean a thing in this house. I'll break a few of 'em before I'm through, too! Not that I think Johns did it, in spite of what that dough-faced female said—my money is on Annesley and the Brent girl—but I'm going to get the truth of that quarrel out of him."

They continued to discuss the various angles of the

case until some fifteen minutes had passed, when Professor Johns appeared. His rather pinched face was anxious, I thought, but his transforming smile as Samuels and Flique greeted him banished the look. I did not see how even Manning could be afraid of Professor Johns. Undoubtedly the girl suffered from an inferiority complex, as she had in effect told us. That was understandable.

"Mr.—Samuels, isn't it?" Professor Johns inquired diffidently, looking at the deputy. "My memory isn't so good as it used to be," he continued, upon receiving the other's nod. "But I think I know what you are after. It must be about that affair I had with Mr. Parados several months ago. The girl was in the hall, I remember. She probably heard something. Well, it was only right that she should tell you."

"It would have been better if you had told me yourself," Samuels said chidingly.

"Perhaps so. Yes, very likely I should have. The truth of the matter is, Mr. Samuels, I was so distressed by the unfortunate affair that I did not wish to revive it. And then with Mr. Parados passing as he did yesterday, I was less inclined than ever to bring it up. But I realize now that I was mistaken. Greatly mistaken, I fear." Professor Johns' eyes were troubled and he fiddled nervously with his glasses. "You are a man of action and it is going to be exceedingly difficult for me to make you understand what that old fort has come to mean to me."

"The fort was the cause of your quarrel, eh?" Samuels exclaimed.

"To be sure. Didn't the girl tell you?"

"No. She didn't get much out of it. Just a word here and there."

"Ah, that is too bad. These half impressions are dangerous. But how shall I make you understand my point of view? Perhaps M. Flique and Mr. Hunt will help me?" and he looked appealingly from Flique to me.

"This fort, M. le Professeur," Flique said gently, "it means much to you?"

Professor Johns began to polish his glasses. A fog had blown across his face. Manning would have said he had gone "all white and twitchy." And he had. It wasn't Professor Johns that looked out of his pain-ridden eyes.

"Does it mean much to me, you ask?" Emotion strangled his utterance. "My friends, that old fort and my work are my whole existence. I don't think I could live without the one or outside the other. My work was done there—my career came out of it! It is the very bone and blood of my body!" He paused; a vein in his forehead throbbed sharply. "The fort has an historical significance. It is one of the very few landmarks we have. It represents a vanished era in the development of the state. I have dreamed of having it restored—Parados promised me the money. I have lived in anticipation of the day when it would stand forth as a permanent monument to the last of the romantic civilizations. And then—four months ago—"

Professor Johns pressed his hands to his forehead. His stricken eyes pierced my heart. Even Samuels was touched.

"Four months ago Parados informed me that I could pack up and get out! After twenty years and all my dreams, gentlemen! He said he was going to *pull down the fort* . . . brick from brick . . . until there was nothing of it left . . . to utterly destroy it. And why?" Johns flung his clenched hands into the air, his pinched face consumed by the flame of his tormented spirit. "Because it spoils his view—that monument of earth and sun and sweat and blood! And because he was going to bridge The Gut and use the sacred ground it stands on for *a part of a golf course!*"

That love of old things which makes a man give his life to the buying and selling of them and to the hoard-

ing of as many of them as he can afford was in my blood. I had inherited it from my father, and the despair in Johns' voice was a knife driven into my own flesh. Was there no wickedness that Dan Parados had not given himself to?

"I talked to him like a madman. Yes, I confess it! I told him that his life was evil—that he lived to inspire hatred and to destroy beauty. I told him that he should not destroy me and my work as he had destroyed everything and everybody that had stood in his way! He listened with a brutal sneer on his face, then he snapped a match between his fingers. 'I'll break you like that!' he said. I realized to what lengths my love of the fort was carrying me, then, and I left him before I went completely insane."

Professor Johns shook himself and passed a hand over his face. His eyes and voice were calmer as he went on.

"Mr. Samuels," he said earnestly, "my feelings towards Parados have been mitigated by his death; but I tell you frankly I could have killed him then with my bare hands had I been strong enough. And even now—I say this fully realizing that it may prejudice my case—I find it hard to curb a feeling of goodwill for the man or woman who struck him down." Professor Johns flung out his hands, himself again. "There you are, gentlemen," he said wistfully. "I have emptied my heart and I'm glad to be rid of it."

"You've made it pretty clear," Samuels admitted, chewing on a cigar. "Your point of view, I mean."

"Mais oui," Anatole Flique agreed, twirling his mustache. "Do I not share it with M. le Professeur and M. l'Antiquaire, this love of the ancient? With me now, it is the collection of old stamps." Flique wagged a finger in our faces. "Messieurs, I am the principal agent of *la Sureté,* but I tell you seriously if a man destroyed my stamps I could—well, almost destroy *him. C'est une emo-*

tion curieuse, cette áffection aux objets antiques, n'est-ce pas, M. le Professeur?"

"I used to collect cigar bands when I was a kid," Samuels said with a morose grin, as Professor Johns nodded. And then: "Parados didn't make good his threat, since you are still here, eh?"

"Yes, I am still here," Professor Johns answered bitterly. "That was his way—to keep a man on the sharp edge of uncertainty until he was ready to brush him over. He knew what I was going through. When he had tired of his little joke he would probably have thrown me out, but I could not give up while there was a shred of hope that he would change his mind. He's dead and I'm human enough to say I'm glad!"

There was silence for a moment after that.

"Let's see, you'd known Parados twenty years, hadn't you, Professor?" Samuels inquired.

"Yes. I met him in San Francisco. He'd just bought San Lucas Island and he offered me the position of curator of the fort at a small salary. My time was to be my own. I wanted to do research work in marine biology and it was a great opportunity for me."

"You had no trouble with him until this matter of pulling down the fort came up?"

"Nothing of moment. I knew his reputation, of course, but he usually let me alone. That was what I wanted."

"Hmn," Samuels muttered. "I guess that's all, Professor. We won't keep you any longer."

Professor Johns invited us to inspect the fort and took his departure.

"Well, he's straightened it out," Samuels said, "but he's given himself a pretty strong motive. Of course he couldn't have done it—not with that alibi."

"Ah, that alibi, my friend," Flique murmured. "No, it would seem not. Parados was shot with a pistol, you say, and M. le Professeur was fifteen or twenty minutes' walk

away when it was done. Well, that is clear. And now you will laugh at me. It does not matter. Monsieur, I have a feeling for evidence—it is of the inward eye and it was always so. When I find it I am enthused. But I am not enthused yet. The evidence we have found has not the significance. You will see."

"It's my opinion we've turned up enough evidence to keep you enthused as long as you live," Samuels grunted.

"But what is it?" and Flique shrugged. "A petal, two roses, a slash across the cheek of a servant, a blackness trodden into a carpet, a newspaper with oil stains upon it, the hearsay of underlings—"

"You are leaving out all the stuff that counts," Samuels interrupted heatedly. "What about the conduct of that Brent girl, Annersley's, and everybody else's hatred of Parados, those two birds, le Balafré and Bec, Jahries snooping in Annersley's room—?"

"Précisément!" Flique cut in. "There is also *l'étiquette* in the dead hand of monsieur,—an astonishing affair, that!—the singular experience of that phœnix, that advertisement in the Marseilles journals, and the admirable Lum We's affection for his ancestor. But these are the little mysteries, my friend,—the conduct of Mlle. Brent excepted. Perhaps we shall solve them first and perhaps one of them will lead us to the big mystery. But we have not yet put our fingers on the—how do you say it?—living tissue. When we do,—ah, then you shall see something! You may laugh—Anatole Flique has been laughed at before. *Mon ami,* you have not the inward eye. That is the secret of the greatness of Anatole Flique."

Samuels shook his head irritably. "We are wasting time. There'll be a crowd of the boys over within the next half hour. I have work to do."

Flique bowed. "It will be a merry party, monsieur. And now you will seek the shoe that trod that blackness into the carpet, eh? And I shall consider the—um—indis-

cretion of that admirable Lum We. *Bien!* But I implore you, M. le Deputy, to remember that he is of the immortals that one—whatever may happen."

Flique laughed, then, and with a wave of his hand went out of the room. I followed him.

XVI

THE ORDEAL OF LUM WE

My inclination was to go in search of Caroline, but a sense of duty kept me at Flique's side.

"I thought you wanted to see Lum We," I said, as he proceeded up the hall, instead of turning towards the kitchen.

"It is a private matter, this, M. l'Antiquaire," Flique informed me. "We shall call upon Lum We at his chamber over the garage. If he is not there we shall wait for him. It was the kitchen door you found open this morning, yes?"

I nodded, giving him a sharp glance as we let ourselves out through the front entrance.

"Is it your belief that Lum We left it open?" I inquired. "I mean, do you think he stole and broke and returned the phœnix because Parados wouldn't let him burn incense to his ancestor—insulted his ancestor, perhaps?"

Flique shrugged. "There is a mystery here, my friend—the big mystery, it is possible, but I do not know. The kitchen door was open, you have told me, and it fastens with a bolt. Does not that suggest that the one who made the escape from you went that way? *Eh bien,* we shall see. Perhaps this Lum We is the guilty one—I do not know. But when I find the principal clew—the living tissue—it shall be yours and M. le Deputy's, also. Am I not generous?"

The blue brilliance of the morning promised astonishing vistas from the backbone of the island which, at its southern extremity, rose to a height of some six hundred feet, and I was anxious to get to the top of it with Caro-

line. The slope was gullied and scarred, rolling and steep. Except in the washes and gullies, where the naked earth, brown or red, challenged the eye, the smoky velvet of chaparral predominated. Eucalyptus trees in bluffs or solitary as vestal virgins provided that touch of graceful elegance which perfects the Southern California scene.

As we rounded the corner of the house and proceeded along the cinder walk which led up to the two-story, red-roofed stucco building that served as garage and servants' quarters, Grainger appeared from behind a cypress hedge, a pair of clippers in his hands. Grainger near to nature seemed to grow in stature. Flique hailed him and Grainger came towards us, his bronze face impassive.

"We seek the chamber of Lum We, my good Grainger," Flique announced blandly. "Will you have the kindness to reveal it to us?"

As Flique had just informed me that our investigation of Lum We was "a private matter," I was more than a little surprised at his request. Grainger gave him a long, hard look before he answered.

"It's in the north room, sir. You can't mistake it. He's got his name over it in Chinese. You go up that outside stair."

Flique thanked him. We were moving off when Grainger spoke again.

"He keeps it locked, sir."

"Because it is the temple of the spirit of his ancestor?" Flique inquired.

"Maybe." Grainger's tone was almost sullen. "He thinks a good deal of it, or of what's in it, sir—and this is a mighty queer house."

"And you have the queerness, also, my Grainger?" Flique retorted briskly. "Come, will you not tell us why monsieur slashed you with his riding whip? Ah, well, it does not matter," he continued as Grainger's face became a block of iron. "Your reason—it is in your eyes."

With this cryptic remark Flique seized my arm and led me to the outside stair which gave access to the rooms above the garage. Grainger's eyes still bothered me, but Flique had already declined to tell Samuels and me what it was he had found in them and I would not ask him again. Grainger stared after us, continuing to do so as we ascended the stair and pushed into the landing of the upper floor.

An oblong white card with Chinese ideograms printed on it was tacked above one of the doors, which opened off the landing. Flique tried the door but it was locked, as Grainger had said, and Flique took out a bunch of queer-looking keys. I have an enormous respect for other people's privacy and I didn't welcome what was going to happen, but I also have an enormous curiosity and I kept my mouth shut while Flique tried one key after another with impressive dexterity. One of them fitted and we entered the room.

It was a square, bare interior with whitewashed walls. A cot stood against one wall, near it a chair and a small table; an old-fashioned brass-bound trunk, a scrap of carpet, and a rickety bureau comprised the other furnishings. The simple austerity of the room censured our intrusion. None of the windows was open and the atmosphere was heavy with the fumes of incense. One could almost see it hanging in the air.

Flique darted nimbly towards the bureau and picked up a square block of wood—teak, I thought—which appeared to have been the base of some object that had been destroyed. A round hole was bored in the block and out of it protruded splinters of a lighter variety of wood. In front of where the block had stood before Flique picked it up was a small, metal bowl, with a deposit of aromatic ashes in the bottom of it.

"Did I not tell you it was the temple of the spirit of his ancestor?" Flique demanded triumphantly.

"His ancestral tablet," I muttered, feeling our intrusion more keenly than ever. "All that's left of it," I added hotly, for I was pretty sure now what had happened to the tablet.

"Mais oui," Flique continued volubly. "And it is broken. You see? But what is this?"

A black, oblong box of really fine Chinese lacquer lay on the bureau just behind where the block had stood. Flique's eyes burned as he picked it up. The box was locked, but the lock was a flimsy affair and Flique, despite my protest, soon opened it with a piece of wire attached to his key ring.

"Monsieur Watson must pocket his scruple," he informed me warmly. *"Voici!"*

The box was filled with broken pieces of wood similar to those sticking out of the hole in the teak block. Chinese ideograms were painted across one surface of many of the pieces. The pathos of that little heap of splintered wood blew powder on my anger and I burst into a tirade at the man whose cruelty was responsible for the deed.

"They can cut 'The Destroyer' on his tombstone—that's the epitaph he's earned," I said. "He did his best to spoil every decent thing he got his hands on. He destroyed his wife's happiness—he threatened Caroline's and Celia's and Annersley's. He was going to wreck Johns' life—God knows how many more he hasn't broken—and he's responsible for this. Poor little devil!"

"It is broken," Flique murmured gently, "but Lum We still burns the incense to the soul of his ancestor. What a faithfulness!"

"I'd bet Parados made Lum We watch him do it, too," I declared vehemently. "No wonder Lum We broke his god and shot him."

"Ah, you think that, M. l'Antiquaire?" Flique was fingering the bits of wood. "No, it will not do."

"You mean he didn't?" I demanded incredulously.

Flique twirled his mustache. "We have solved one of our little mysteries, *mon ami,*—that is all," he said. "Lum We stole the phœnix and broke it—that we know? Perhaps he killed monsieur—but that we do not know."

"The evidence points towards him," I protested, for I was thinking of Caroline.

"The evidence of circumstance, yes, but, monsieur, I do not trust that. I have not touched the living tissue—I have not enthused. Ah, you laugh! It does not matter. Anatole Flique has been laughed at before."

"You don't think he killed Parados, then?"

"I have the inward conviction that he did not—I do not *know.* But I *shall* know, as you shall see."

Flique had a way of making a statement stand up without basing it on logic, and I found myself doubting what had seemed certain a moment ago. Before I could reply a slight noise fell upon my ear and I swung around. I was just in time. Lum We was hurtling out of the doorway, a wicked-looking butcher knife in his hand. His eyes were green and his face was black and his objective was the rounded convexity of Flique's plump shoulders.

I got him on the side of the chin with a powerful right drive and he dropped at my feet. He was no bigger than a boy and I wasn't particularly proud of the blow, but it had to be delivered.

"Thank you, my friend," Flique gasped, and he polished the top of his head. "My little victory made me forget that he would come. It would have been most *désagréable,* that knife."

Lum We opened his eyes and stared up at us, but he did not move or speak.

"Granger must have told him," I said.

"Did I not intend him to?" Flique inquired, and he surprised me by eyeing the prostrate Lum We with a regard that was almost affectionate.

"You wanted him to commit himself—is that it?" I

exclaimed. "Well, he's done so. Do you still believe he did not kill Parados?"

"And why should I change my mind?" Flique inquired, flinging out his hands. "The murder of monsieur was—um—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"Premeditated?"

"Précisément! This," beaming tenderly upon the Chinaman, "would have been the crime of passion. There is a difference. But here is M. Samuel."

The deputy had at that moment entered the room.

"What's all this?" he demanded.

Flique showed him the remains of the ancestral tablet and with many gestures and much volubility of utterance explained what had happened.

"And so," Flique finished, bowing in my direction, "had it not been for the good right arm of M. l'Antiquaire you would have had another trouble on your hand."

"I saw him streaking across the lawn with that knife," Samuels muttered. "Get up!" he commanded, prodding Lum We in the ribs.

Samuels was irritated and I gathered that his irritation arose from the fact that Flique and not he had brought about the present highly significant situation.

The Chinaman climbed slowly to his feet and stood blinking in the strong sunlight and smoothing his spotless white apron with shiny yellow hands. He was once again the bland and smiling little man of the previous night and it was difficult to think of him as having come hurtling through the door, black and green with rage, a knife in his hand, not five minutes before.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" Samuels demanded sternly.

Apparently Samuels was convinced that Lum We had killed his master. I wasn't so sure myself, as Flique's skepticism had unsettled my own convictions and Lum

We's murderous attack on the little Frenchman had not altogether steadied them again.

Lum We bowed almost to the floor. "I am profoundly regretful, Mr. Samuels," he said, guileless of tone and expression. "I beseech the forgiveness of Mr. Flique and to Mr. Hunt I extend my admiration." Lum We caressed his chin, then his hands dropped limply to his sides and his chin fell onto his chest. "I am a weed at the feet of their pity," he murmured abjectly.

"You know what happens to weeds," Samuels said harshly. "You intended to kill M. Flique!"

"A devil inhabited me," Lum We explained sorrowfully. "But Mr. Hunt has torn me from it. I am as a tender bloom in the garden of innocence."

"Why did you attack M. Flique?"

Lum We blinked imploringly from one to another of us; then he took refuge behind the traditional impassivity of the Oriental.

"The hut of a poor man is the temple of his ancestors," he explained cautiously.

"You objected to him being here?"

"M. Flique perfumes the air with his goodness," Lum We continued, and his eyes came to rest uneasily on the lacquer box, "but the spirit of my father—" His voice flickered like a light going out, "—the spirit of my father has walked on slender swords—and a devil invaded me—"

"Who broke your ancestral tablet?" Samuels interrupted.

"Mr. Palados," Lum We replied.

"Why?"

"Because I clouded the light of his countenance."

"Do you mean because you burned incense to your father's spirit, when he had forbidden you to?"

Lum We bowed. "Mr. Samuels has dipped his tongue in the ointment of understanding. Also, he is a man of

great wisdom. Would he have me dishonor the spirit of my father? It is a matter of enormous solemnity."

"So you stole the phœnix?"

"It was his god," Lum We said simply, "and he had polluted the spirit of my father."

"You broke it and returned it?"

"He had extinguished the tablet of my father's spirit."

Samuels leaped forward and caught Lum We by the wrists.

"You stole the phœnix—you killed Parados; then you got scared and returned the phœnix broken. All right, I've got you. You might as well come through."

Metal clinked and flashed in the sunlight and Lum We was neatly handcuffed. Samuels' charge was the logical one and he had done the proper thing in handcuffing the Chinaman, I supposed, but I was not satisfied. I looked at Flique. He was smiling, an ironical quirk at the corners of his mouth, and my doubts increased.

Lum We retained his composure as Samuels towered above him.

"Mr. Samuels is perpetrating an error," he observed blandly. "I did not exterminate Mr. Palados. He put a devil in me, but I contented it with breaking his god. That was enough." Lum We stated his philosophy in those three words. "When his god left him life left him. But I did not exterminate Mr. Palados. The gods desired him to bloom in their garden and they took him."

"Well, I'm going to take you to bloom in a different sort of a garden," Samuels informed him grimly. "Come on!"

He had dragged the Chinaman nearly to the door when Flique spoke.

"M. le Deputy?"

"Yes?"

"You are certain this man killed monsieur?"

"You've heard his story, haven't you?" Samuels de-

manded wrathfully. "He tried to take your life and he's admitted that he stole and broke the phœnix. You said yourself that China lives for her dead—that's the motive. What more do you want?"

But Samuels' vehemence to the contrary, I doubted that he was as sure of himself as he pretended to be.

"Does monsieur forget those others?" Flique inquired mildly. "The little mademoiselle, M. Annersley and Mlle. Jahries, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec, the excellent Grainger and M. le Professeur? Is there not evidence and motive for each of those, and has not Grainger spoken for Lum We?"

"We've caught Grainger in two lies already," Samuels replied hotly. "He may have lied about Lum We being in the kitchen last night, as well. I've a notion Lum We and he are in this business together."

"C'est possible, my friend, but consider," Flique continued earnestly. "We have solved one of our little mysteries. That is good. And perhaps we have touched the big mystery, but I do not know. M. le Deputy does not know either, if he will permit me. I beseech a favor."

"Well?"

"You will confine Lum We. That is proper. A devil might possess him again. But do not—how you say?—officially charge him with that crime until we have—um—the word, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"Investigated further—is that what you mean?" I grinned.

"Précisément!" and Flique bowed. "Monsieur will be generous, yes?"

Samuels must have been acutely aware of the wide range of his suspicions without Flique's gentle reminder, and I was not surprised when he grunted assent.

"Maybe there's something to what you say. I guess we can lock him up in that garage downstairs." He removed the handcuffs from Lum We's wrists. "Watch

your step, Chinaman, or I'll rope your hands to your feet."

"I am honored that Mr. Samuels condescends to believe me," Lum We purred, bowing.

"I don't," Samuels assured him emphatically. "This house is crazy, and I'm giving you your chance with the rest of the crowd, that's all. Get along!"

A couple of old touring cars were the only vehicles in the commodious garage space below and I surmised that the island did not offer much in the way of motoring. Several windows were let in the cement walls and we saw at a glance that the place would not hold our captive any longer than it took him to break one of them and climb through—unless he was handcuffed to some object he could not move. The north end of the building, which was walled off from the garage, served as power house and workshop. An electric plant, evidently the source of the establishment's light and power, occupied the center of the floor, a small lathe and a couple of benches ran along the walls. Its three windows made it impossible for our purpose. Lum We himself solved our problem.

"If Mr. Samuels will condescend to illuminate the southmost wall with the beam of his countenance he will reveal a small door," Lum We informed us with a benignant smile.

The south wall was in shadow, and on coming into the building blinded by the brilliant sunlight we had not noticed the door to which he was directing our attention. Samuels approached it suspiciously, appreciating with the rest of us the novelty of a prisoner discovering his own jail.

"What's the idea?" Samuels wanted to know, taking a firm hold of Lum We's arm.

"Mr. Samuels will consider it an ample security for my miserable carcass," the Chinaman explained blandly. "I shall be most happy to sojourn there."

The door opened into a small square room with cement

walls, floor and ceiling. A single window, so small that even Lum We could not have crawled through it, shed dingy light upon a cobwebby accumulation of old trunks and odds and ends of furniture. The door was of two inch pine. Samuels, still suspicious, thumped upon the walls and eyed the window.

"C'est un véritable donjon!" Flique exclaimed.

We backed out, leaving Lum We behind, and Samuels slammed the door. Tossing aside a heavy padlock that hung from the staple driven into the door jamb, he swung the hasp over and ran one of his handcuffs through the staple, securing the door.

"That'll hold him," Samuels said.

"And now monsieur will resume his search for the shoe that trod that blackness into the carpet, eh?" Flique chuckled. "And when he finds it we shall have solved another of the little mysteries. First the little mysteries, then the big mystery. That is the way of life, is it not?"

Samuels muttered one of his imprecations and took himself off.

"What next?" I inquired of Flique.

"To think and to act, *mon ami,* that is the sum of achievement, yes?" and he gave me his beaming smile and a dig in the ribs. *"Très bien!* I shall think, and you, M. l'Antiquaire, shall find the pretty mademoiselle. It is well that I am not twenty years younger. Run along, my little one."

XVII

PARADOX IN RED

You soon lose touch with the ardencies of youth in the antique business, and I hurried off feeling ridiculously juvenile. Whether Flique's little absurdities were his defense against the sordid atmosphere in which he had spent his life, or the impulsive expressions of his spontaneous nature, I did not know, but it is certain that they helped to keep my feet on solid ground during those trying days.

Caroline had said she would be up on the slope and I followed the path that ran along the edge of The Gut. It was apparent at a glance that The Gut could not be crossed, except perhaps at very low tide, as Professor Johns and Hendricks had said. The tide was running out. By noon it would be low. But even at a minus tide the narrowed channel, pierced by a thorny hedge of gleaming rocks, would present a formidable barrier to any one who had managed to scramble down either of the precipitous flanks of The Gut, both of which must have been two hundred feet deep. Now it was impassable. Tawny waters hissed into secret caverns with the swift and violent stealthiness of tigers on the kill. At full tide on a moonless night the place would give a man something to think about. No one crossed it during the hour in which Parados was killed. Of that I was certain.

The Gut was curved like a scimitar, its point extending southward. A half mile of brisk walking had brought me almost to the apex of The Gut when the path became three trails. One of them led around The Gut, another turned north, and the third continued up the slope towards a

eucalyptus bluff half a mile ahead. I took the third trail, whistling a snatch of something or other. A meadow lark responded with its three or four notes of song.

Chaparral clad the trail on either side of the slope, but as I drew near to the bluff it thinned down to solitary clumps of lilac or buckthorn. The fragrance of the eucalyptus trees spiced the shining air. As I looked down from this park-like scene to the sheeted blue of the ocean I was almost persuaded to ask myself if the sinister house on the cliff were not part of an evil dream that would presently pass from my mind.

"Such a lovely morning to be lazy on," Caroline said. "How did you manage to get away from that funny Mr. Flique?"

Caroline's warm contralto came from behind a thicket of buckthorn a little way to my left. I found her sitting against a eucalyptus tree with *The King's Henchman* on her lap and that bantering look I loved in her eyes.

"He told me to come and find you," I laughed, dropping beside her.

"That was nice of him. Isn't it gorgeous up here? I could almost forget that horrible affair ever happened."

"That was my thought when you spoke," I said. "You feel as though you had come up out of something corrupt. It isn't what happened to Parados that matters really—he got what was coming to him. It's what he destroyed before he went and the hatred he left behind him that counts. Yet he wanted to build a monument to himself. The man was incredible. He didn't belong to this age. I suppose he'd have led an army a thousand years ago."

"He wasn't Miss Millay's kind of a king," Caroline said, looking down at her book. "I hoped King Eadgar would convince me Parados hadn't existed."

"It takès more than one decent king to make you forget a rascal," I said. "Don't you like that terse bit where Aethelwdd tells Maccus he has seen his lady and the

king's? I always read it after I've had a day with a customer who talks too much. . . . You don't mind if I smoke?" I inquired, lighting a cigarette.

"Not at all." Her eyes were derisive as they considered me. "Do you mind if I do?"

"Try one of these," I grinned, passing my case. "But you didn't last night."

I had felt relieved when she declined one of Annersley's cigarettes, but I was quite comfortable about her taking one of mine.

"You didn't ask me."

"Annersley did."

"I don't cough." Caroline's eyes sparkled. "You are such a refreshing young man, Mr. Hunt."

"That's interesting. In what way?"

"How old are you?"

"Thirty—almost."

"Heavens! Whoever heard of a man of that age being in the antique business? I thought they were all sixty at least, and wore beards like Victorian scientists and editorial writers."

"You think my profession has aged me, then?"

I was sitting on the grass at her feet, my face on a level with hers, and I knew I had never seen anything quite as satisfactory as the picture she made. Her eyes were nearly serious—an ironic gravity was their expression, perhaps—and she was studying me attentively. A wisp of smoke curled up from her parted lips which were full, but not too full, and from her cigarette which was hidden in the long grass. Most of the modern girls are bored about their cigarettes. Caroline was too natural to be bored about anything.

"I'm not so sure now," she informed me meditatively. "I thought you were old—inside, I mean—but you are not. I suppose it's that thin, dark, wiry look you have." Suddenly she was laughing at me, little crinkles tugging

devastatingly at the corners of her eyes and mouth. "M. l'Antiquaire, you have turned the clock back," she declared. "You are younger than you were last night. I don't believe you are more than sixteen."

"Well," I grinned. "I've been through a good deal since last night."

Her eyes darkened and I regretted the reference I had made.

"So have I," she replied soberly. Her lips trembled and she extinguished her cigarette. "You must have a good deal to tell me."

"I'd sooner talk about Edna St. Vincent Millay," I said gently.

"So would I," and she smiled wistfully. "But you mustn't forget that Mr. Samuels still suspects me of killing Parados."

"Samuels," I said stoutly, "is an ass. But I doubt very much if he does suspect you now."

No restrictions had been placed upon me and I described my venture during the night, recounted what Flique had told us, and I informed her of what had developed during the morning.

"I can't quite imagine Lum We killing his master," she said thoughtfully, when I had done.

"He had plenty of motive. China lives for her dead, as Flique said."

"Why couldn't Parados have left him alone?" Caroline cried passionately. "He had everything any man could wish for and Lum We had nothing but his father's spirit, yet he must violate that. What a beast he was! Do you think Lum We did it?"

"I don't know." Her outburst had depressed me. "Grainger gave him an alibi, but Grainger has something up his sleeve, too, and we haven't much faith in it. He's lied twice already. If Lum We's motive was the only one we'd turned up I'd say yes, but it isn't, by a long shot.

There's Annersley's, Johns', the French convicts', Celia's, Mrs. Parados', Grainger and Miss Jahries probably have one—"

"And Caroline Brent's."

"Don't say that," I begged, for the hardness in her tone had distressed me. "Surely it isn't necessary for me to tell you that I know you hadn't anything to do with it?"

I had drawn nearer and she dropped her hand onto my arm.

"It's dear of you to say that—" her eyes were tragic, "—but really you don't know anything of the sort."

"Nonsense!" I was beginning when she stopped me.

"It isn't nonsense. You are just being emotional, and detectives," she smiled, "are not supposed to be emotional. Can't we be logical about it?"

"But when you try to throw suspicion on yourself you are not being logical," I burst forth. "You are not going to tell me that you killed Dan Parados, much as he deserved it, are you?"

"Of course not. And I'm not trying to throw suspicion on myself, either. But I would say I hadn't killed him if I had. Don't you see? Of course you do. I had motive, hadn't I?"

"Two good ones," I admitted reluctantly.

"And Parados deserved what he got?"

"This isn't getting us anywhere."

"It is!" she declared emphatically. "It's bringing you to the point of admitting that Mr. Samuels has just as much reason to suspect me as he has any of the others."

Caroline was right, of course, and I admired her refusal to sentimentalize her connection with the tragedy, but she was looking at me steadily, her eyes unsmiling and as clear as ice, and I felt that she was deliberately presenting to me another aspect of herself. It won my

respect, this other side of her, but it was the Caroline of the teasing smile and the little quirks at the corners of her mouth and eyes that I wanted just then.

"All right," I conceded, grinning. "You win on points. But can't we talk of something else?"

Caroline was instantly her adorable self again and I mentally pocketed the observation that winning an argument evidently meant a good deal to her.

"That was nice of you," she said, twinkling at me. "Men are usually so sure. But—I'm afraid we can't. You see, it's quite vital to me."

"Well, all right. Let's review the affair. If you had done it, you wouldn't have used a forty-five. A thirty-eight, perhaps, but not a forty-five. And not any kind of a gun equipped with a silencer. Where would you have got a silencer, I'd like to know?"

"That's true," Caroline admitted, "but it hasn't been proved that a silencer was used. And if one was used, are you forgetting that it was suggested that Parados may have been killed with his own weapon? It is not known that he possessed a forty-five equipped with a silencer, but that does not prove he didn't have one."

"A silencer must have been used," I said. "If Celia heard that telephone ring some of us would have heard the shot, if it had not been silenced. That's settled. The other point, I admit. Parados *may* have been killed with his own weapon; however, it isn't likely. But there's so much else that does not touch you at all to be considered. That advertisement in the Marseilles newspapers, for instance. We know that Lum We stole and broke and returned the phœnix, but we don't know who advertised to the world in general, and to le Balafré and Cicéron Bec in particular, that the phœnix was on San Lucas, unless it was you," I added gravely.

"It wasn't," Caroline assured me solemnly.

"The assumption is," I continued, "that Parados was Jules Lacôte, who sent his accomplices to Devil's Island for a million francs. Whether this is a fact or not, it looks as if the person who inserted that advertisement not only believed it was, but hated Parados enough to try and bring the two men whom he—or she—thought were Parados' worst enemies to San Lucas. Now this unknown person must have known Parados for some time, or he—or she—couldn't have pried into his past, so it can't be you, as Parados was almost a stranger to you. On the other hand, Mrs. Parados,—certainly, Mrs. Parados!—Johns, Annersley, Celia, even Miss Jahries and Grainger, might have found opportunity to dig into Parados' past, and then sent off that advertisement. See the point?"

"Of course!" and Caroline gave me one of those teasing smiles that I loved. "But we do not know that the assumption, as you call it, is correct. Parados may have been Lacôte and he may not. We do not know, M. l'Antiquaire. And if he wasn't, your lovely theory goes bang."

"Just the same, I'm inclined to think the assumption is more likely to be correct than not."

"Perhaps it is. But even if Miss Jahries, shall we say, inserted that advertisement, it does not prove that the French convicts killed Parados, any more than it proves that Miss Jahries herself killed him because the convicts did not come."

"I admit that, too. A belief that Parados was Lacôte is as far as I am prepared to go. And to continue your argument: Lum We stole the phœnix, Mrs. Parados hated her husband, Annersley must have dropped that yellow petal inside the safe and smashed open that drawer to get those Fleetwood documents, Grainger was slashed across the cheek by Parados, Johns hated Parados because he threatened to destroy the fort, Celia detested him be-

cause of his treatment of Annersley—but none of these motives proves that any one of these persons killed Parados. I haven't said anything about the alibis."

"Don't forget to include my name," Caroline reminded me. "And, Celia and I are the only two who haven't an alibi."

"It's a gorgeous paradox from beginning to end," I continued. "The evidence against any one of the persons I have named is discounted by that against the other half dozen. And I'd like to know why Grainger dropped that rose into the waste paper basket, and what Annersley had under the newspaper if it wasn't a pistol, and why Miss Jahries didn't resent Parados' insulting remark about my cuff links, and what she was doing in Annersley's room, and why Celia cried out in the pergola, and—oh, Lord, there's no end to them. I can guess at some of 'em, of course. And then there's the biggest paradox of them all."

Caroline nodded slowly. "Yes, that price ticket in his hand. Do you suppose a woman—?" She stopped, shivering.

I had thought of that, too. "It does look more like a woman's touch than a man's. But thirty-five cents! If it had been into the thousands, now. It doesn't make sense."

"Sense!" Caroline echoed in a tense voice. "None of it makes sense." She suddenly put her hands to her head. "When I think of every one of those people—myself, too—hating him as we did, I wonder if all of us were not insane. Hatred like that—think of it! And hatred like that was what he wanted! You can't destroy hatred as you can a human life. It lives."

"It's pretty awful," I said gently, "but won't you try and forget it for a little while?"

"I can't!" Her eyes were distended, her voice throbbed

with horror. "It seems to come up on the wind. The air we are breathing is tainted." She struck her breast. "I can feel it here!"

The look in her eyes touched me. She seemed another person. I took her hand, pressed it hard.

"You mustn't let it get hold of you that way," I pleaded.

She looked at me intently; her eyes were feverish.

"I'm afraid!" she whispered. "There's more coming. I can feel it—hanging. You—you don't think I killed him, do you?"

"Good God, no!" I exploded, seizing both of her hands. "Caroline, you mustn't talk like that! You mustn't look at me that way! Pull yourself together. You've nothing to be afraid of. You hear me?"

She began to weep then, and I drew her against my shoulder and held her hard. Something inside of me was going around at a terrific rate and I don't know what I shouldn't have done if two launches had not at that instant rounded the promontory that formed the extreme end of the south side of the cove and put in towards the wharf. The aggressive putt, putt of their motors modified the various excitements I was under and I recalled that Samuels had said he expected reinforcements from the mainland. A flock of gulls in the vicinity of the wharf took wing, screaming stridently, and swooped and circled above the cove.

Caroline looked up, drew away from me, shook the tears out of her eyes. Her expression reassured me.

"Forgive me for making such an idiot of myself," she begged. "Going over it like that unnerved me. I'm all right now."

"Sure?"

"Yes, yes. Who are in those launches, do you suppose?"

"The police and the reporters, probably," I said. "Samuels is expecting them. There'll be more question-

ing. Do you feel you can stand it?" I asked anxiously.

"Of course I can. You won't think any more of those foolish things I said? You won't, will you?" and she looked at me steadily and earnestly.

I did not answer for a moment.

"All right," I promised.

"Do you think they'll take—any one back with them?" She gave a little shiver.

"No one just yet, perhaps," I answered somberly.

"I hope it isn't Annersley or Celia. Celia has been lovely to me. I—I suppose we'd better go down."

"Let's drop in and see Professor Johns," I suggested suddenly. "He seems a decent chap and that old fort should be full of interest."

"Professor Johns—" She stopped, frowning. "Don't you think he's—eccentric?" She gave that little shiver again.

"Well, he ought to be," I laughed. "He's lived alone long enough."

"Yes, that must be it. I'm not sure I like queer people."

"What about antique dealers?" I inquired in an injured tone.

That ironic gravity of expression—or perhaps it was a tender derisiveness—was in her eyes as she looked up at me. My heart jumped.

"They can't help themselves, I suppose, and—they can be improved. Oh, come on! Let's go and see Professor Johns."

Taking *The King's Henchman* in one hand and my hand in the other, she hauled me to my feet.

"I'll race you!"

There was a wind-blown look in her face that I loved. . . . Caroline thought she could beat me down the slope, but I soon showed her that she couldn't.

XVIII

A FIRE IS LIGHTED

Professor Johns hailed us from the tower of the fort as we were staring at the ruined walls. To our surprise he came out with a seagull lying in his arms and a good deal of blood on his lean white hands.

"Good morning, my friends," he greeted us, and I felt as well as saw the quick warmth of his smile. "This is another of my friends. He hurt one of his wings and I have been doctoring him."

"Is his wing broken?" I inquired.

"No. The bruise is rather deep, though. But I washed it with an antiseptic and he'll be all right in a day or two if he doesn't get into any more mischief."

"He's trembling," Caroline murmured, gently stroking the bird's white neck. "You poor little thing! Can't he fly?"

"I fear not," Professor Johns said. "We can try him," and holding the bird tenderly he put it down. "There you are, old fellow—let's see what you can do."

The gull stood rigid with fear for an instant, then it lifted its head, looked sharply right and left as birds do, and ran swiftly a yard or two, when it spread its wings. As the gull cleared the ground its left wing flapped back against its body and with a shrill cry it fell on its side. Caroline ran to pick it up, but it went off at a fast trot before she could reach it.

"The poor thing!" she exclaimed. "Won't the other birds peck it to death?"

"If he stays around here, and I think he will, I'll see that they don't," Professor Johns smiled. "I've doctored

a good many birds these twenty years and I'm vain enough to believe they know me. I like to think of them as my children," and he chuckled. "Some day I hope to have this corner of the island declared a bird sanctuary. That is another of my dreams," he added wistfully.

"Do you love all living things?" Caroline asked.

"It hurts me to see them suffer," Professor Johns answered gently. "But the fleetest of us are brought down when our time comes."

His eyes were following the erratic course the gull was taking towards the edge of the cliff, but I knew that he was thinking of something else.

"You have an interesting place here, professor," I said.

His response was instantaneous.

"And I love every crumbling brick of it," he declared with his illuminating smile. "But you know that. Come, you must see it. I am privileged to show it to few people."

"The tower has been restored," Caroline exclaimed animatedly. "It's a dream of a place. Isn't that ivy beautiful?"

"Mr. Parados had to make the place habitable for me," Professor Johns explained. "But he wouldn't touch the walls. Every year the warm rains crumble away a little more of the original adobe. The tower is my particular joy. I—I sometimes feel as if I were a part of it." Professor Johns wiped his glasses. "That ivy is old English. The salt wind tried to take it away from me, but I won."

The ivy embraced the north and west walls and clustered around the windows, of which there were three, one above another, on both walls. It was healthy and beautiful and I realized how persistently he had labored with it.

Professor Johns led us into the compound of the fort, which was about a hundred and fifty feet square. The walls, some two feet thick, had been ten feet high at one time. Great gaps were broken in them and here and there the elements had worn the adobe down to the earth. A

similar ruin lay upon the little dwelling huts that leaned against the inside of the walls. In the center of the compound was a goldfish pond, around it a vegetable garden still occupied by odds and ends of the fall planting.

"Lettuce for the rabbits," Professor Johns chuckled.

A green scum covered the surface of the pond. Caroline stirred it with a stick and a pair of dejected-looking goldfish moved sluggishly. As we poked around the compound, turning up an old mill-stone, a primitive wagon wheel, a broken olla, Johns dwelt on the history and present condition of the fort.

"Think of it, my friends! A man building himself a fort against the coming of a nation. There were men in those days, I tell you."

"Are the Velasquezs extinct?" I asked.

"I think so. Don Miguel was the last of his line, so far as I know. He died of a broken heart thirty years ago. Perhaps he foresaw that the next owner of San Lucas would turn the site of his old home into a corner of a golf course. But here, I am boring you with my troubles. There's something outside I want to show you."

Blinking vigorously, Professor Johns led us through a gap in the west wall.

"There!" he exclaimed.

It was an old brass cannon, a sixteen pounder, mounted on blocks and pointed towards the west. The blocks were imbedded in the sandstone rock and a greenish patina covered the rounded flanks, which once no doubt had shone like new gold. A home-made tompion of what I judged to be eucalyptus wood tightly plugged the muzzle.

"Where did it come from?" Caroline asked a little breathlessly.

"Don Ramon, the Velasquez who built the fort, had it brought up from a Spanish frigate," Professor Johns answered. "I doubt if a shot has been fired from it since. Most people would call all this wasted labor, I suppose,"

he went on, waving his glasses at the cannon and the fort, "but I tell you, no! It was the brave gesture of a gallant gentleman and gallantry is never in vain. But here I am letting my sentiments get the better of me again. It is kind of you to be patient with me. Shall we have a look at the tower?"

As we came around to the front of the fort a stentorian hail from the other side of the cove attracted our attention. Kirk was waving to us.

"You are wanted over here," he roared. "All of you. Get a move on!"

"More questions," I said, looking anxiously at Caroline. "I suppose we'd better go."

Her quick nod and the warm pressure of her hand reassured me.

"Dear me," Professor Johns protested, "I thought I had told them everything I know. I so much wanted to get back to my book. Have the police any idea yet who shot Mr. Parados?"

"Their ideas embrace about everybody on the island," I said. "Lum We is Samuels' latest suspect."

As we started back I told him a little of what had developed, but he did not seem greatly interested. His alibi was sound, of course, but it was my impression that his lack of interest arose not from a belief in his own security, but from his deep concern with his various romantic and scientific obsessions, which excluded from his mind any notion that the suspicions of the police might come to rest on himself. The personality he presented to us was as refreshingly naïve as that of a little boy engrossed in his postage stamp album.

The ordeal we approached with such diffidence turned out to be not nearly so unpleasant as we had expected it to. Douglas Ross, the district attorney, and Dr. Steen, the coroner, were the principal officers of the new arrivals. Dr. Steen was a negative sort of person, but Ross, who

did most of the questioning, had a face like a blade knife and a voice like cold flame. Johns and I were disposed of first and we managed to remain in the room while the others were examined. Flique had given me his beaming smile, but I afterwards learned that he had neglected to correct the district attorney's impression that I was in some way connected with himself. Each of us was required to give an impression of his fingerprints, the idea being, I thought, to learn if any of the fingerprints Kirk had found in the library the night before had been made by some one not a member of our group.

Nothing of moment was turned up until Grainger, who had been left until the last, was brought in and questioned. Ross made no impression on the man's austere gravity until he suddenly said:

"Why did you drop that rose into the wastepaper basket?"

"I didn't."

Grainger's lips tightened, but he carried the lie off well. I wondered why he stuck so persistently to his denial when its falsity had been proved.

"Don't lie. Why did you do it?"

"I didn't!"

Grainger's eyes smoldered angrily as he stubbornly repeated his denial and they again reminded me of some one else's. I wondered if that unknown person might not be the key to his "little mystery." Flique knew.

"No?" the cold flame inquired. "Why did your master slash you across the cheek?"

Grainger's hands knotted convulsively. "There's a red-handed murderer on this island," he cried harshly, ignoring the question. "I'll say that much. And this, too. If you don't find out who did it, I'll be doing it for you. And that's all I'm telling you!"

A sharp silence fell.

Ross extended a long, lean finger. "So you know who killed your master?"

"I'll tell you no more," Grainger answered stormily.

"Perhaps you killed him yourself?"

"No," Grainger said coolly, "but I wish I had. He needed killing. Is there anything else, sir?"

"You may go."

As Grainger shut the door behind him, Ross got up.

"We haven't made a great deal of headway," he said to Samuels. "You'd better give Grainger your attention. If he didn't kill Parados himself he thinks he knows who did. Don't bully him, or he won't tell you anything."

"I'm not sure Lum We isn't our man," Samuels replied doggedly. "If he is, Grainger knows it. That's certain. I've a notion Grainger is trying to direct us away from Lum We."

"And for that reason he dropped his rose into the basket, M. le Deputy?" Flique inquired. "Perhaps the admirable Lum We has a passion for roses, yes?"

Samuels muttered one of his imprecations then, and the discussion became animated and general. I gathered that Ross and the coroner shortly were going to return to the mainland. Johns and I drifted out.

"A fine fellow, Grainger," Professor Johns observed. "I shouldn't like to think he had anything to do with the murder of his master, richly as Parados deserved what he got."

"He hadn't," I retorted with conviction.

The newspaper men were waiting for us at the upper end of the hall and we had to go all over it again; but they were a friendly crowd and I enjoyed meeting them. We had to pose for our pictures, of course, and I wondered what Morrison would say when he found me looking at him from the front page of his morning paper. Johns got on well with the newspaper men and I felt that

he had made a study of the art of adjusting one's self to the temperaments of others. A good many of us might do likewise with profit.

Ross and the coroner left shortly afterwards and the reporters went with them. The inquest, it appeared, was to be held the next afternoon. Parados' body was taken up to the bedroom he had occupied before his death.

Miss Jahries prepared lunch, which Manning presently announced. The principal course was a lobster Newburg. Grainger had traps set in the cove and he had found half a dozen plump lobsters in them at low tide that noon. Lum We himself could not have served us more appetizingly, yet the meal was a wretched affair. Even Flique, absorbed in his thoughts and oblivious of the lobster sauce on his mustache, took less than his usual delight in his food. We were all glad to escape from the table.

Flique went off by himself; so did Samuels. I commandeered Caroline again and we spent the rest of the afternoon on the slope. We started down in the magenta glow of the early evening, a good deal quieter than we had been when we had gone up. Life, I was now thoroughly convinced, had more to it than the buying and selling of antiques, Morrison's cynicism to the contrary.

It was nearly seven and quite dark when we got back to the house. After Caroline left me I wandered around, smoking a cigarette and looking for Flique. I did not find him. No one seemed to be around, in fact. Johns' head, bent over a table or desk, was visible against one of the north windows of his tower, the window being lighted, and I thought of looking him up, but it occurred to me that he would be busy on his book and might resent interruption.

Now that Caroline had left me I was restless again. The tide was high and The Gut was making as terrific and ominous a row as it had the night before. This continuous assault upon my eardrums depressed me, and as

I looked up at the house, crouching in the darkness like some myriad-eyed monster of legend, I felt as if it were breathing its poisonous atmosphere upon me.

Shuddering, I lighted another cigarette and went around to the north side of the house. To my relief, I found Flique on the little terrace, pulling on one of his diminutive cigars. He gave me his beaming smile and I dropped onto a bench near him.

"You come with a weariness, *mon ami,*" he chuckled. "Has the little mademoiselle walked you too far?"

"No," I said candidly, "I could walk all day with Caroline."

"Ah, it is 'Caroline' already," and Flique wagged a finger at me. "That is good! And it is well that I am not twenty years younger. But I have said you come with a weariness. Why is this?"

"That Gut gets on my nerves!" I exclaimed savagely. "If Samuels keeps us here much longer some of us will go crazy. Haven't you got onto anything yet?"

"Monsieur is impatient."

"But you are the principal agent of *la Sureté,*" I reminded him gravely.

"That is true," he admitted, frowning, and I smiled to myself. "But there are many motives and much evidence. As I have told you, it will be first the little mysteries and then the big mystery. *C'est la vie.*"

We were silent for a moment.

"In view of Johns' temperament and obsessions," I said thoughtfully, "he would seem to have had about as strong a motive as any one."

"That is so," Flique admitted absently.

"But he could not have crossed The Gut—that's settled."

"Précisément," Flique murmured. "As you say, that is settled."

His casual air irritated me. "Aren't you interested?" I demanded.

"Monsieur," he said reprovingly, "I have a problem."

"Excuse me. What is it, may I ask?"

"I shall tell you. The excellent Manning has confided to me that for dinner we shall have a steak of the tenderloin with mushrooms. Monsieur, I am troubled. Will it have the tenderness, that steak—"

"Flique, you are impossible!" I exclaimed.

"Eh, what is that?" he inquired in astonishment and looked hurt. "You think it is not of the importance, that matter? Ah, you Americans!" and he shrugged impatiently. "Will you never learn that life is to be lived? But what is this?" he continued, recovering his amiability. "M. le Deputy with another little mystery in his hand?"

Samuels was hurrying towards us, carrying what appeared to be a wading boot. Brushing past me he presented the sole of the boot to Anatole Flique's inquiring eyes and illuminated it with a spot of light from an electric torch he pulled out of his pocket.

"Look at that, will you?" he said tersely.

A little patch of solidified crude oil adhered to the instep where it joined the sole and embedded in it were two or three fibres of a bluish material.

"Monsieur has the sharp eye," Flique murmured admiringly. "And this enormous boot, it is whose?"

"Grainger's!" Samuels exclaimed. "I found it in the garage. Jahries said that the stain was not on the library carpet early yesterday afternoon. It was there last night. These fibres you see were pulled out of the carpet. I've just talked to Jahries again. She said Grainger was wearing his waders last night before dinner. He'd been down on the beach. Grainger told us he was not in the library between yesterday noon and when Parados was found. He lied again. I've got him this time!" and Samuels shook the boot exultantly.

"I compliment monsieur," Flique said with a bow. And then, twirling his mustache: "But there is this Lum We—"

"Lum We hated Parados," Samuels interrupted. "You know that. He and Grainger were friendly. They made that double alibi up between them. Lum We stole and broke the phœnix because that was his Chinese way of getting back at his boss, and Grainger killed Parados."

"There is also Mlle. Brent, M. Annersley, Mlle. Jahries, Professor Johns, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec, madame herself—"

"Well, it can't have been all of them," Samuels cut in sharply. "Lum We and Grainger are the birds we want. I'll soon shake Grainger's motive out of him."

"Ah, his motive, my friend. You will find a motive, but not the one you desire, in Grainger's eyes."

At that instant, a shot rang out in the house behind us.

So sharply did it cut across the surface of our minds that for an instant we stood rigid. My first thought was that some one, Kirk, perhaps, was demonstrating that a shot could be heard above the roar of The Gut at high tide, but I knew in a flash, we all knew, that it wasn't that. Flique bounced onto the grass and in a couple of jack-rabbit leaps arrived at the kitchen door. Samuels and I were a second or two behind him.

There was no one in the kitchen. We heard a scream in the hall and we found Manning with her face as white as a cornstarch mold and her arms wound around Miss Jahries, who was staring into the library with the fixed and horrified expression of one who has unexpectedly stumbled onto a tomb.

In a sense she had, for Grainger lay on his face on the hearth with a hole in his back.

The fire, which he had just lighted, began to crackle.

XIX

THE EMPTY SHELL

Of the three of us, Samuels took it the hardest, I think. Kneeling beside the body, he moved it gently and lifted the head until we were able to see the face. Grainger had died with a look of astonishment shattering the graven dignity of his expression. The match with which he had kindled the fire had burned down to his thumb and finger, which still held it.

The order of burnt powder was distinctly noticeable.

"I'm wrong again, Flique," Samuels said.

It was as touching a confession of human fallibility as I had ever heard.

"To confess *ses erreurs,* monsieur—that is true greatness," Flique murmured gently. "Come, we shall start again."

As Samuels got up it was my impression that the demoniac fury of The Gut reached a higher, wilder pitch and I actually found myself entertaining the notion that it had had something to do with Grainger's death. The notion slid out of my mind as people began to appear at the door and windows.

Mrs. Parados pushed in from the hall, Kirk, and Gridley, a county detective Ross had left behind, pressed in through the patio window, which was wide open, and a low cry of horror brought my eyes to the west window. Caroline stood there, the window open at her back.

"Which of you found him?" Samuels demanded of Miss Jahries and Manning.

"I did." Miss Jahries' lips were bloodless as she answered; her eyes looked as if they were scorching their sockets. "I was in the kitchen preparing dinner. Man-

ning was in the dining-room. I heard the shot—" Miss Jahries' voice failed her for an instant. "I heard the shot and I rushed out. Manning was just behind me as I got to the door."

Manning began to sob hysterically.

"Shut up!" Samuels commanded and Manning abruptly became quiet. "Did you see any one in the hall or in this room, Miss Jahries?"

"No one," the housekeeper answered stonily. "No one but Grainger."

Samuels turned to Kirk and Gridley. "Have a look at those windows. He must have used one of 'em. And see if Lum We still is locked up. Make sure he couldn't have got out." The deputy ran his eyes from one to another of us. "Johns, Annersley, Hendricks, the Ferris girl," he muttered, checking the missing. "Any one seen any of them?"

"Johns is in the fort tower," I told him. "At least, he was a few minutes ago. I saw his head against the window."

"How many minutes ago?"

"Five, perhaps. Just before you showed us that boot."

"Celia and Annersley went off by themselves some time ago," Mrs. Parados announced dispassionately.

Samuels nodded and stepped up to the writing table. He was reaching for the house telephone, a handkerchief in his hand, when Flique stopped him.

"Monsieur?"

"Yes?"

"You will first observe the position of the telephone?"

It lay on its side at the end of the writing table nearest the fireplace, the receiver off the hook. I supposed it had been knocked over, but as I looked at Flique I wasn't so sure. His face quivered with an emotion which I supposed was excitement; its innocuous pigmentation had turned at least three shades deeper.

"Somebody knocked it over," Samuels said irritably.

"Who?"

"I don't know. Grainger, probably—or the person who shot him. It isn't important. I want to know if Johns really is in his tower. That might be important."

With his handkerchief over his hand, Samuels held the receiver to his ear and pressed one of the buttons at the other end of the table.

"Is that you, Johns? . . . This is Samuels. Come over to the library right away."

"Not important, the position of that telephone, you think?" Flique murmured, as Samuels put the instrument down. "Monsieur, it is the vital clew, the living tissue!" Flique's voice shook, his eyes shone like bits of polished enamel, he aggressively twirled his mustache. "Did I not tell you Anatole Flique would find it? But he is generous. He shares it with M. le Deputy."

"What are you driving at, Flique?"

The little man wagged a plump finger in Samuels' face. *"C'est différent,* this murder, my friend. We hear the shot, we smell the powder. I find this on the floor." Flique held up an empty cartridge case, a forty-five.

"Where was this?" Samuels asked as he took the shell.

Flique pointed to the head of the bearskin rug across which the body lay.

"This is interesting, *mes amis,*" he continued, "but the important facts, the living tissue, are these: That the telephone is upset *so,* that the good Grainger is shot in the back as he lights the fire, and that both doors of the patio window are wide open—when M. Parados was shot they were closed, you will remember." Flique spread his hands. "Monsieur will concede that I am generous?"

"All right," Samuels said abruptly. I doubted if he could have brought himself to make such an admission twenty-four hours before. "Why not stretch your generosity to the point of telling us what particular significance these facts have?"

Flique's smile was positively beatific as he answered.

"That I shall do, but not yet. You shall make your inquiry and I shall make mine, and at the finish we shall put the heads together and then—*qui sait?* Perhaps we shall have the big mystery."

Samuels shrugged, since there was nothing else he could do, and turned again to Mrs. Parados.

"Have you any idea where Annersley and the Ferris girl went to?" he asked.

"I haven't," Mrs. Parados said.

There was a deadness in her voice that reminded me of the tone in which Miss Jahries had just answered Samuels' questions and I wondered if their reactions to Grainger's death were similar. Mrs. Parados had bothered me from the first. Clearly, the hardness with which she had encased herself was a consequence of the cruel tragedy her married life must have been, but after Parados' death had become known to us I had sensed a different emotion, a dreadful secret satisfaction, perhaps it was, fermenting behind her accentuated blondness. That look was gone now. Something else had taken its place and was straining at the brittle hardness the woman had imposed upon herself. Whether it was terror or horror or dread, I could not decide, but I had the feeling that Mrs. Parados had not counted on this.

"Where were you when the shot was fired?"

"In my room dressing for dinner."

"Alone?" Samuels pursued.

Mrs. Parados lifted her eyes to his, but I could not make anything of their expression now.

"Alone," she said coldly. And then, bitingly: "If you had been on your job this wouldn't have happened."

Samuels took it very well. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Parados. We'll do our best to get to the bottom of this. Grainger was shot by the one who killed your husband, of course."

"Because he knew too much," Mrs. Parados said positively.

"How did you know that?" Samuels' tone had sharpened.

"We all knew it," Mrs. Parados continued scornfully. "I heard him tell the newspaper men. You weren't able to get any more than that out of him, I suppose?"

"No," Samuels admitted. "He wouldn't tell us what he knew."

"That was like Grainger," Mrs. Parados muttered, and her eyes dropped to his body.

"You thought a great deal of him?"

"He was faithful," Mrs. Parados answered slowly, lifting her eyes again. "Well, you've got lots of ground to work on."

An awkward silence followed. Remembering himself, Samuels glanced contemptuously at Manning, reflectively at Miss Jahries, and brought his eyes to rest on Caroline, who had not moved away from the window through which she had entered.

"What were you doing out there, Miss Brent?"

"I heard the shot and I came down."

Caroline's face had whitened as she answered, but I threw her an encouraging look and it seemed to steady her.

"Where were you when you heard it?"

"Upstairs. I'd just stepped out onto the roof. It was nearer to come down the outside stair."

Caroline's room must be near mine, I reflected.

"Alone?"

"Alone, Mr. Samuels."

"You always are alone at the wrong moment, aren't you, Miss Brent?" Samuels inquired ironically.

A protest sprang to my lips as Caroline's distress deepened, but Flique intervened just then with a sharp exclamation.

"Nom de nom," he whispered. "What is this?"

He was on his knees beside the body, and had been going through the pockets of the garments that clothed it. A knife, keys, a pipe, some money and matches were spread out on a handkerchief. As we bent over his shoulder he was fingering a piece of twisted steel shaving—part of a spiral, perhaps—some two inches long and possibly a seventh of an inch wide. The shaving had been wrapped in a scrap of newspaper which had fluttered out of his hand to the floor. Flique's hands were trembling, I saw.

"What is it?" Samuels asked, as he took the bit of steel from Flique.

"But a shaving of steel, monsieur," Flique replied. "I found it in a pocket of poor Grainger's waistcoat."

Flique's voice was calm now and his hands had ceased to tremble. I could make nothing of his eyes as he looked up.

"Anything else?" Samuels wanted to know.

"Would you expect the assassin to leave his card in the pocket of his victim?" Flique inquired mildly.

Samuels, at this, included Caroline, Miss Jahries, Manning, and Mrs. Parados in a sentence or two of dismissal, adding an order that they remain in the house. I went as far as the door with Caroline. It is the little intimacies that give meaning to life. I was already bitterly regretting the thirty years it had taken me to find this out.

"Have you any idea why Grainger took the trouble to wrap this up and put it away in his pocket?" Samuels was saying, as I returned.

"Perhaps it told him who killed monsieur, his master," Flique answered.

"Does it tell you that?" Samuels shot back.

Flique twirled his mustache. "Monsieur," he said impressively, "I am generous. It is the living tissue, that trifle of steel. You will treasure it, I implore."

"What's on your mind, Flique?"

"*Non, non,* my friend," the little man cried, wagging his head. "The pot—it is not yet cooked. Afterwards, we shall put the heads together, as I said."

Samuels muttered one of his imprecations, disgusted, it was evident, yet compelled by the logic of events to recognize the quality of Flique's intelligence.

"It looks as if Grainger was shot because he knew too much," he hazarded, after a moment.

"I can think of no other reason, M. le Deputy."

"I wonder why he wouldn't tell us what he knew."

"It was in his character not to," Flique answered. "Perhaps he did not know enough and perhaps he desired to expose the assassin himself. Who can tell?"

"The shot was fired inside this room," Samuels continued moodily. "That is certain this time. We smelt powder and found the empty shell."

"Also," Flique reminded him significantly, "that telephone is upset, the patio window is wide open, and the poor Grainger dies in front of the fire he has just lighted."

"I don't get your idea at all," Samuels said irritably. "There may have been a struggle. If there was, the telephone could have been upset. As for the fireplace, Grainger had to fall somewhere—why not there? And the patio window *would* be open. The killer had perhaps ten seconds in which to make his getaway. He wouldn't stop to close it."

Flique twirled his mustache. The gesture signalized most of his triumphs, I had discovered. A perplexity seemed to be indicated when he polished the top of his head.

"If there had been a combat would Grainger have continued to hold the match, I ask you? Would it not have been heard by Manning and Mlle. Jahries? *Non, non,* it is too perfect, this arrangement."

He ran nimbly to the patio window and we followed him. Both doors of the window were swung back against the side of the house.

"You see?" he inquired.

"The killer may have flung them back as he made his getaway," Samuels insisted, and with reason I thought. "That's about what happened. Of course, there's just a chance the wind sucked them open. It's blowing pretty strong."

Flique shrugged. "It is conceivable that Anatole Flique is mistaken," he admitted. "As I have said, we shall see."

"The window was closed when you found Parados, wasn't it?" Samuels demanded impatiently, as we reëntered the room.

"Yes, monsieur, it was closed."

Samuels' refusal to surrender his opinion appeared to have irritated Flique and his tone implied a disinclination to continue the subject. Samuels veered off.

"I suppose you'll admit the field is narrower?" he said. "Lum We, Grainger and Johns are out. So are Miss Jahries and Manning. That leaves Mrs. Parados, the Brent girl, Annersley, Hendricks, the Ferris girl, and those two birds from Devil's Island."

"It is of alibis that you are thinking, eh, my friend?" Flique inquired, beaming again. "Perhaps we shall break a few of those yet."

"Grainger's?" Samuels asked ironically. And then he became serious again. "You are not suggesting that Lum We or Johns shot Grainger, then beat it out through that window, are you?"

"Monsieur is pleased to jest," Flique answered amiably. "But no, I do not suggest what clearly did not happen. . . . Hello, who is this?"

Hendricks appeared at the patio window, Kirk and Gridley behind him. As he came into the room I saw that he had lost a little of his ruddy color. His lips trembled as he looked down at Grainger.

"I'm sorry about this, sir," he said huskily, after a moment. "Grainger and Professor Johns were about the only two human beings on this damned island."

"Thought I'd bring him along," Kirk remarked.

"Where was he?" Samuels asked.

"In the boathouse cooking his supper."

"How long had you been there, Hendricks?"

"All afternoon, sir. I'd been working on the engine."

"I guess he was down there when Grainger was bumped off, all right," Kirk continued dourly. "I went down as soon as I'd seen Lum We was O.K. If he had been up here I wasn't five minutes behind him. But he hadn't. Why? Because he was frying himself a juicy tenderloin and it was about ready and done slick as I butted in."

Flique chuckled and Samuels permitted himself a sour smile.

"You didn't hear the shot, Hendricks?"

"No, sir. When the tide is high you can't hear anything for the row in The Gut."

"I suppose not. That'll do just now, but stick around the house. See any one else, Kirk?"

"Lum We, that's all. The place stunk of incense. Some'dy must have shoved it under the door. Grainger, mebbe. He liked the Chink."

Samuels nodded. "See if you can find Annersley and the Ferris girl."

Professor Johns entered at that moment from the hall. His brown eyes passed inquiringly from one to another of us, then came to rest on the figure on the hearth. He stopped suddenly and took off his glasses, almost dropping them as he did so, and a film of horror crept slowly over his colorless face. For a moment he was unable to speak.

"Mr. Samuels, what is this?" he asked in a feeble voice.

I felt sorry for Johns. Men who have given their days to abstract study lack those reserves of every-day experience necessary to cope with the brutalities of existence.

As Samuels explained what had happened, Johns nodded in a dazed way, plucking nervously at his neat gray beard.

"Grainger was a good man," he said presently, in a shadow of a voice. "I would have given everything I own to have prevented this. We were friends."

Even Samuels was touched.

"You saw much of him, M. le Professeur?" Flique inquired.

"Quite a little, M. Flique; quite a little." Professor Johns' voice grew stronger and he replaced his glasses. "He was a lonely man, like myself, and sometimes he would come to see me in the evening. He was the only person on the island who could talk to me about my work. Hendricks is a bright lad, but he hasn't got the scientific outlook. Grainger had, although he was uneducated. I—I don't know what I shall do without him. Have you any idea who did it?"

Samuels shook his head. "Had you been in the fort some time when I telephoned you?"

"Several hours. I had been writing."

"That's all. You had better remain over here for a while. . . . Hello, here's Annersley. We've been waiting for you."

Annersley stood in the patio window, the light from one of the lamps illuminating the little twitches of horror that were breaking through that precarious calmness with which he had fenced his emotions. As he came into the room, his distended eyes fixed on the body, I found myself holding my breath.

"Good God!" he whispered, and bent over the body. "This is dreadful! Celia, Celia!" he groaned. And then, whirling towards Samuels: "Who did this?"

Samuels looked him over silently before he told him what he knew in a dozen curt sentences.

"Where have you been during the last half hour?"

Annersley lowered his eyelids, but I did not miss the sharp fear that flashed into his eyes. He was able to calm his expression before he answered.

"Walking along the cliffs," he replied in a level voice.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Where was Miss Ferris?"

"I was with her up to an hour ago."

"Well, where did she go then? She's not in the house."

The little red lamps began to burn in Annersley's cheek bones.

"I left Miss Ferris by the garage."

"Where did she go to?"

"I don't know."

"You do know!" Samuels shouted. "You've been holding out on me from the first. Where is that girl? Why did you utter her name just now? Come clean with the whole thing!"

Annersley had locked himself up tighter than ever when Celia suddenly appeared at the hall door.

"Mrs. Parados said you wanted me—" Celia stopped as her eyes lighted on Grainger's body.

I shall never forget the look that came into her face. It was another of those piercingly vivid pictures I was to carry away from that house of horror. Annersley extended his hands towards the stricken girl and tried to voice her name. I think in that instant he suffered as greatly as she did. Celia ran forward, the thud, thud of her heels driving nails into my heart.

"Father—father—what have they done—?"

She fell insensible across Grainger's body.

XX

"THE EYES OF GRAINGER"

THAT puzzling look in Grainger's eyes should have enlightened me, but it hadn't and Celia's scream affected me with a sense of horror as sharp as any I had yet felt. The rose incident was clear now; so was the significance of the slash across Grainger's cheek. Flique was the only one of us who had divined the truth. That was the difference between Flique and the rest of us, I suppose.

Annersley lifted Celia clear of the body the instant after she had fallen.

"Why did we let him go on with it?" he muttered in an anguished voice. "Celia, open your eyes. Speak to me, dear! Celia, Celia! Somebody's going to pay for this. Dear girl, look at me!" Supporting her against his bent knee, he began to chafe her hands, whispering unintelligible tendernesses. "Can't one of you get her something?"

I found some wine in the dining-room. Annersley snatched the glass from my hands and tilted it to her lips, spilling much of the wine down her chin and neck and breast.

"You knew about this?" Samuels asked Flique.

"The eyes of Grainger, M. le Deputy," Flique answered sadly. "It is another of the little mysteries."

Responding to the stimulant, Celia opened her eyes and for an instant looked around in bewilderment; then she flung herself sobbing upon her father, called to him, took his hands, pressed them to her lips, laid her cheek against his, implored him to speak to her. Annersley placed himself at her side and I turned with Flique and Samuels to the west window.

Samuels decently gave them ten minutes.

Celia was quiet when we looked around. Her honey-colored head rested against Annersley's shoulder. He held her hard; he held her within the fence he had built around his own spirit, I thought. Their eyes were fixed on the body. Caroline and Miss Jahries and Mrs. Parados were wedged in the hall door. I wasn't sure that they understood the situation, but Caroline and Miss Jahries understood human grief. Caroline's cheeks were wet. Miss Jahries' would have been had she known how to weep and had she not been preoccupied with some tormenting aspect of this fresh horror which had not yet become apparent to the rest of us. At least, her eyes suggested some such preoccupation to me. Mrs. Parados' face was impassive.

"I shall have to ask you and Miss Ferris some questions, Mr. Annersley." Samuels' tone was considerate but firm.

"Miss Ferris isn't fit to be questioned," Annersley flung angrily over his shoulder.

"She'll have to pull herself together," Samuels said, a little less considerately and a little more firmly. "You people have told just as much as you felt like telling and no more. I want the rest of it and I want it now. Miss Ferris may go up to her room while I'm talking to you, if she likes."

"You are not going to bully her!" Annersley exclaimed, helping Celia to her feet. "If there's anything you want to know ask me."

"Let me tell him, Claude," Celia said in a numbed voice. "It's got to be told. I can't keep it in my heart any longer. And I want to get it over with so I can go upstairs and cry." Her voice faltered and I thought she was going to break down again, but Annersley's adoring look sustained her. "Yes, Mr. Samuels?"

"Did Parados know Grainger was your father?" Samuels asked quietly.

"Yes."

"Did any one else in the house know?"

"Mr. Annersley."

"I mean any other member of the household?"

"I don't know," Celia answered.

Samuels looked at Mrs. Parados. "Did you?"

The woman laughed and I didn't know whether to hate or pity her.

"I was only Dan's wife," she drawled. That bitter, venomous thing inside the woman leaped up into her eyes. "I didn't suppose even my husband would make an intimate of the daughter of one of his servants."

Celia cried out as if she had been mortally hurt. Annersley would have struck Mrs. Parados, had she been a man.

"What do you mean by that?" he shouted furiously.

Mrs. Parados shrugged, well satisfied with herself. "Men as prominent as my husband was do not, as a rule, place the children of their gardeners in positions of trust."

She had meant a good deal more than that, but Samuels did not give Annersley time to press the point.

"Miss Ferris and I will do the talking, Annersley," he said, rather obviously himself again. "All right, Miss Ferris."

Annersley vented his anger upon a chair which he dragged up for Celia, placing it where she would not be able to see her father without turning her head. But this she proceeded to do the moment she had dropped into the chair and so intense became her grief that Annersley, all tenderness now, took her into his arms again.

"Go up to your room until you feel better, dear," he pleaded. "You can't go through with it now."

"I'll never feel better," the unhappy girl wept. "To

see him like that—after all he's done for me! It's my fault. I shouldn't have let him go on with it. He never did anything but kindness all his life. Who could have done it? Claude, why did we stay in this wicked house?" Celia covered her face for an instant; then she drew herself free of Annersley and shook her head. "I think I can go on now," she said.

Grainger, it seemed, had lost his wife, Celia's mother, shortly after the girl was born. Deeply emotional and passionately in love with his wife, he had faced the emptiness ahead with that bitterness of spirit that makes lunatics or misanthropes of men of his type. Celia pulled him through. It wasn't difficult to imagine Celia as she must have been then—honey-colored hair and dimpled pink innocence and amusing precociousness that predicted the modern sophistication of her young womanhood. Grainger had found in her a new focal point for his strong affections. That was what he had needed and he had lavished the fullness of his nature upon her.

"Nothing was too good for me," Celia said tensely, "and of course I didn't appreciate him. Even when I was old enough to know better I took everything as a matter of course. I was always demanding things, and if he could give them to me he always did. But I intended to make up afterwards. You must believe that." Her tragic eyes searched ours for assurance that we did. "And now it's too late. I can't do anything for him! He's gone! I took everything and gave nothing. What a selfish little beast I was!"

Grainger had had very little education, but he had a good brain and he liked to read—Professor Johns supported this warmly—and Celia must have the advantages he had been denied. A pretty old story, this, I suppose, but Celia managed to invest it with a sort of dignity that made me blink my eyes and caused Flique to polish his head more vehemently than usual. Celia must go to col-

lege, become a young lady, meet the right men—that was what Grainger wanted. Nothing was too good for his Celia. He was willing to go to any lengths to bring his ambition to pass.

Grainger had been a first rate mechanic with an inventive turn of mind, but he had had no commercial sense. Later on, he had taken up landscape gardening and done moderately well at it. He never had much money. Celia always seemed to need—no, to *want*, she insisted passionately—so much. And there was Celia's education to save for. Yes, it was a pretty old story.

"I don't know how he did it. I never stopped to think. I just took everything. He sent me to a good school in the east. I had plenty of clothes and a wonderful time and he never complained about my extravagance, although he had to sell his business to put me through. That made it necessary for him to take a position. You see, it *was* my fault."

Grainger entered Parados' employ about the time Celia graduated. He sent for her. They were to talk over her future. The house was shut up the week Celia came—Johns happened to be away, too—and Grainger was alone on the island. They had made no definite plans when Parados turned up by himself for a couple of days' fishing. Grainger was ignorant of his employer's ugly reputation and he had been secretly hoping that Parados would see her and perhaps suggest some business or semi-professional opening that Celia might fill with credit to herself. Grainger's naïve faith in his Celia was touching. She was accomplished and lovely. It was only necessary that she make the proper contacts.

"Dad was so proud of me. He was sure I could go anywhere. And when I told him he was silly he just laughed in his grim way."

Parados had seen her, as Grainger had intended he should, and Parados had fallen for her father's lovely

Celia, as Grainger had known he would—but not in the way Grainger had hoped, it was to turn out. Parados came bluntly to the point. He wanted a confidential secretary. Miss Celia looked as if she might do, but Parados was a man of affairs and he wouldn't want it generally known that he'd picked up the daughter of his gardener, a man whom he had had in his employ less than three months, and put her in a position of trust. No, indeed, and what were they willing to do about it? Well, what could they do about it? Parados, it seemed, had a plan. If Miss Celia cared to adopt, say, her mother's name, and come to him recommended by one of his associates, and hold no communication with her father—well, four thousand a year and the social prestige of being Dan Parados' secretary wasn't to be sneezed at. She could think it over. But not a word to any one else, not even to Mrs. Parados, whether Miss Celia took it or not. Parados made a joke of it. Another of his little jokes.

"Dad didn't know men as well as his daughter did," Celia went on with a hard laugh. "I think I saw from the first what Parados had in his mind, but I was willing to take the chance. I was sure I could take care of myself. It was up to Dad, though. I'd been selfish and extravagant, but I couldn't ask him to put me right out of his life—to see me constantly but never to know me—give me credit for that." Celia again searched our eyes for assurance that we believed her. "But I was selfish enough to be willing to do what was required if he was willing. And he was, of course. It was such a wonderful opportunity, he thought. I must let nothing prevent me—nothing."

Celia shut her eyes as if she were afraid of what we might see in them.

Parados was fairly decent, at first. A trifle familiar, perhaps, but Celia was a modern girl and proud of her sophistication, and she managed to put up with him.

Mrs. Parados hated her, but Celia returned the feeling to some extent and she got a certain amount of enjoyment out of the situation. There was a zest to working for a man with a reputation.

"And then Claude came."

As Celia said this she made us feel that the advent of Annersley was both a beginning and an end. Her eyes softened and warmed and her hand stole into his, and I decided that only the theory of the attraction of opposites could explain the depth of feeling that existed between this extremely modern young woman and the aloof, inhibited Annersley. Parados soon saw how things were going between them. His ugliness showed itself then and he began to put pressure on Annersley. Celia thought he had had some notion of divorcing his wife. At any rate, he wanted Celia and he didn't care how he got her.

"Mrs. Parados thought I wanted her husband, as well as Claude." Celia curled her lip. "I hated him. And now I hate myself. Parados' wickedness has killed Dad, but it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been such a heartless little beast and we had left the island. I shall never forgive myself!"

Celia burst into a torrent of weeping. Annersley held her tight and glared at Samuels and patted her shoulder and did and said the foolish little things I should have done and said myself, had it been Caroline who had emptied her heart. Celia shook the tears out of her eyes.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Samuels?" she asked in an aching voice.

"You remained in Mr. Parados' employ because he threatened to break Mr. Annersley if you left—was that it?" Samuels asked grimly.

"Yes," Annersley interposed quickly. "He didn't actually threaten to break me until a month ago. We thought he might get over his infatuation if we let him alone. But a few days ago I began to see that he wouldn't. That

was why I came over yesterday. I should have taken Celia away and started over again. This wouldn't have happened then." Annersley looked down at the figure in front of the fireplace. "I didn't want Celia to marry a bankrupt," he said huskily, after a moment.

"Did Grainger know of this situation?"

"Not until a week ago," Annersley said. "We had to tell him then. He wanted to horsewhip Parados, but we managed to quieten him down. Yesterday afternoon his feelings got the better of him and he followed Parados into this room—that must have been just before Hunt arrived. There was a pretty violent scene, I imagine. Grainger didn't remember just what he did and said, but I think he struck Parados. Parados then lashed him across the cheek with his quirt."

"Grainger told you this?"

"He told Celia this morning."

"M. Flique and I are of the opinion that Grainger was shot down because he knew too much," Samuels said.

"He was!" Celia declared passionately. "He told me this evening that he had found something. I had gone up to his room over the garage. I was there while he was murdered—here."

"Was this what he had found?" and Samuels held up the scrap of steel shaving Flique had taken from Grainger's pocket.

"He didn't say it was," Celia continued, "but I saw him looking at a bit of twisted steel like that with an odd expression in his eyes. He wouldn't tell me any more—that was his way. Where did you find it?"

"In one of his pockets," Samuels answered, and he turned to Annersley. "You may take Miss Ferris up to her room, if you like, but come back here."

Celia knelt by the body again, but after a moment she permitted Annersley to escort her from the room. Samuels dismissed Caroline, Mrs. Parados, Professor Johns,

Miss Jahries and Manning, cautioning them to remain in the house; he then instructed Kirk to tell Gridley to report to headquarters. If I had not wanted to hear what Samuels would have to say to Annersley when he came back I should have gone after Caroline.

Samuels moodily considered the steel shaving Flique had found in Grainger's pocket.

"This must have come from some steel object Grainger machined on his lathe," he muttered, challenging Flique with a look.

"But yes, monsieur," Flique agreed blandly, adding: "And poor Grainger lost his life because of it."

"You think so?" Samuels' tone was a trifle savage.

Flique shrugged. "We shall see." He seemed disinclined to pursue the subject. "Here is M. Annersley."

Annersley's eyes were defiant, but he was afraid. I felt it the moment he entered the room.

"Well?" he said tersely.

Samuels lighted a cigar with deliberation.

"Did Grainger say anything about that yellow rose he dropped into the waste paper basket."

Annersley started violently and I guessed that Grainger had not told him that we were aware of the rose incident.

"Yes," he admitted, after a long pause.

Samuels drew leisurely upon his cigar. "What did he say?"

"That he dropped it in the basket because he knew one of you would find it."

"He wanted us to find it?"

"Yes."

"Because he knew it would offset the significance of the petal we had found in the safe?"

"Yes." Annersley dragged the word out of his throat.

"You admit it had significance, then?"

"I must," Annersley said bitterly. "I was wearing a yellow rose at the time."

"And you'll admit Grainger's little stunt weakens your defense?"

"Yes."

"In fact," Samuels continued ominously, "you are about ready to admit that Grainger thought *you* killed Parados?"

Annersley's fear stood naked in his eyes for an instant.

"All right," he shouted violently. "But Grainger was wrong. Parados was murdered by the man or woman who shot Grainger. You don't think I shot Grainger, do you?"

"If monsieur will tell us his little mystery could we not then answer his question?" Flique inquired.

"I have told you everything I know."

"You haven't told us what you had under that newspaper when you interrupted Hunt and Parados last night, Samuels drawled.

The look Annersley flung at me made my ears tingle. His lips were white and I knew that Samuels had hit him hard.

"Hunt must be given to visions," Annersley said cuttingly. "There was nothing under the paper."

"There were oil stains on it."

"Possibly." Annersley's tone was a trifle too careless. "I had been in the gun room looking at Parados' firearms. The newspaper was in my hand and I put it down on the table. Some oil had been spilled." Annersley must have known that we did not believe him, but his voice gained in confidence as he continued. "I had motive enough, God knows, but I did not kill Parados. I should think it is pretty obvious that he was killed by the person who got Grainger. You don't believe I killed the father of the girl I am going to marry, do you?"

"If you killed Parados, and Grainger had a case against you—yes," Samuels replied bluntly.

Annersley shrugged. "All right," he said coldly.

"You have Miss Jahries' statement. That is my alibi. Is there anything else?"

"I suppose you didn't find a forty-five Colt automatic equipped with a silencer in the gun room?" Samuels queried dryly.

"I did not!"

Samuels considered the end of his cigar. "I guess that's all just now," he decided.

"A question, M. Annersley," Flique murmured blandly.

"Well?"

"You were familiar with the—how you say it?—the comings and goings of poor Grainger?"

"To some extent."

"Did he ever take the little holiday from the island?"

"I believe he did, yes. A day or so now and then—when there was nobody here."

"*Merci.* That is all."

Towards midnight, Douglas Ross, the district attorney, Dr. Steen, the coroner, and a small army of minor officers and newspaper men swooped down upon us. We had an unhappy time of it for about three hours and all of us, Samuels included, were glad when they took their departure. The inquest was postponed until Monday, when a double inquest was to be held.

Samuels was worried. He had received a panning from Ross and I imagine he was afraid that he might be taken off the case. Parados was prominent, but pretty generally disliked, and Grainger's murder, together with his daughter's story, had injected into the case that human element to which public sympathy invariably responds. Ross was keenly aware of this and he wanted an arrest to offset the sharp comment that was pretty sure to come from the press before long. The facts surrounding Grainger's death, Ross pointed out, tended to exclude the theory that he and Parados had been killed by some outside person or persons—Bec and le Balafré, for instance. The affair had

distinctly an inside look, Ross contended. It was time Samuels was getting results.

"Ross is about right," Samuels said vehemently, when the district attorney and his retinue had gone. "Grainger must have been shot by some one who knew something of his habits and the plan of the house. No one else could have known that he had got onto anything. That lets Bec and le Balafré out. The bird we want is right here in the house!"

"I shall be desolated if I am not to embrace those little ones," Flique murmured. "Monsieur le Deputy," he continued, twirling his mustache, "it is a question of the honor. Would you have me, the principal agent of *la Sureté,* retreat with the empty hand? I should expire of shame."

"Is it your opinion that Bec and le Balafré shot Parados and Grainger?" Samuels demanded forcefully.

"That I did not say, *mon ami.* Nor do I say that M. Annersley is the guilty one because he has refused to reveal to us his little mystery. But I have the conviction that Messieurs le Balafré and Bec are—um—bits of this curious mosaic, is it? And I assert—most emphatically I assert, M. le Deputy—that when M. Annersley has explained his little mystery we shall quickly approach the end of our mysteries. When M. Annersley has opened his heart I shall ask him another question. It will be of great significance, that question."

"What is the question?"

Flique chuckled. "That, monsieur, is the little mystery of Anatole Flique. I implore your patience."

Samuels tossed his cigar into the grate.

"Flique," he said abruptly, "it lies between Annersley and one other person, in my opinion."

"And that other person? Or is it the mystery of M. le Deputy?" Flique inquired, beaming.

"I don't make mysteries for other people to solve,"

Samuels retorted brusquely. "Hasn't it occurred to you that there is only one person in the house who was without an alibi both last night and to-night?"

It had occurred to *me,* and my heart stood still as Samuels put the question.

"Ah, the little mademoiselle with the admirable *grand-mère.* It is unfortunate, that. But what are you going to do to the charming friend of M. l'Antiquaire?"

"I'll take another whack at Annersley and Jahries," Samuels replied. "If their alibis hold—"

"Monsieur has a tenderness for alibis," murmured Flique.

"It is one of the fundamentals of my craft," Samuels retorted. "If their alibis hold I'll take the Brent girl over to headquarters for detection."

"You mean you'll arrest her?" I shouted, no longer able to contain myself.

"Something of the sort," Samuels grunted. "Sorry."

Fortunately, Flique shoved himself between us.

"*Non, non, mes amis.* This will not do. Let us retire. Dawn will bring a coolness to the heads."

I had enough sense left to realize that by antagonizing Samuels I should only make things worse for Caroline, and I permitted Flique to lead me to the door.

"Courage, my little one," he whispered, pressing my arm.

But even Flique's unsinkable optimism failed to lessen the stunning effect of Samuels' decision and I stumbled out into the hall sick with dismay. If ever the truth was needed, it was needed now.

A slight noise down the hall attracted my attention. Miss Jahries was entering her room.

I dragged myself upstairs.

XXI

MISS JAHRIES' "LITTLE MYSTERY"

TOWARDS dawn I got an hour or so of sleep. I felt better when I awoke and able to examine Caroline's position in a more collected frame of mind.

Samuels' view that some one with a fairly intimate knowledge of the house had killed Parados and Grainger was reasonable, I thought; and while Caroline's guilt was unthinkable to me I had to admit Samuels was justified in taking into consideration the unfortunate fact that with the exception of Celia, whose relationship to Grainger lifted her above suspicion, she was the only one in the house who had been unable to offer proof of his or her whereabouts on either tragic occasion. Also, I conceded Caroline's motives. Beyond that I refused to go.

If Samuels' theory that both murders were done from the inside was the correct one, le Balafré and Bec and the host of Parados' enemies not known to be on the island were eliminated. Of those on the island, my first choice was Annersley. Johns had two sound alibis, Mrs. Parados and Lum We had one each, Hendricks there was no reason to suspect. Flique had been cynical about alibis in general, but I did not see how Johns' or Lum We's or Mrs. Parados' could be broken. Clearly, Annersley was the likeliest suspect. Flique had said that Annersley's "little mystery" would throw much light upon the situation. Did he mean that Annersley was guilty? In his own defense Annersley had contended that he would not have killed the father of the girl he was to marry, but I did not attach a great deal of weight to that argument. If Grainger had held Annersley's life and liberty in his

hands there was no telling what Annersley might not have done. You cannot predict human conduct under such conditions.

Yes, it must be Annersley. And Miss Jahries was involved in it with him. My heart went out to Celia.

As I descended the stair the austere figure of Miss Jahries arrested my attention. She stood in front of the library door, her hand on the knob, a curious rigidity about the set of her head and shoulders. I had just reached the bottom of the stair when she opened the door and pushed into the room, driven, it was my impression, by some deep sense of conviction. I quickened my step, and Samuels' curt "Hello" and Flique's amiable "Good morning, mademoiselle," fell upon my ears as I reached the door.

"Mr. Samuels—M. Flique—"

Miss Jahries' voice, husky with emotion, broke as I entered the room with an air of unconcern. The haggard expression of her face shocked me.

"Mademoiselle wishes to tell us her little mystery, yes?" Flique inquired gently. *"Bien!* We are ready, eh, M. le Deputy?"

Samuels remained quiet, but his eyes were hot with excitement. Miss Jahries' lips were as white as the knuckles of her clenched hands.

"I have something to tell you," she said huskily. "It's costing me a good deal, but I can't let that girl suffer. You mustn't think I care about Parados being killed. He was a brute. He didn't get one-tenth of what was coming to him. I wish I'd had the courage to kill him myself years ago!"

Miss Jahries' tone and eyes as she said this were molten. Her whole being had become ignited by the terrific energy of her pent-up emotions.

"I should have told you last night, but I was afraid. Fear and hatred are about the only emotions I have per-

mitted myself to feel since Dan Parados brought me here and I hadn't the moral courage to do it. Parados wanted fear and hatred of his people and I fed his evil egotism, as everybody else did one way or another, until I had about murdered my own individuality. You give way to the baser emotions and soon you find you haven't anything else left within." Miss Jahries struck her breast. "Sometimes I think my heart is an empty shell. Grainger was one of the few unselfish men I have known, but I shouldn't have come to you if it hadn't been for Miss Brent. I overheard you say you were going to take her to Los Angeles. I've had a dreadful night, but strength has come to me and I am here to tell you the truth. Miss Brent did not kill Parados. Mr. Annersley killed him. I don't blame him for that, but I wouldn't have thought he was a coward. I wouldn't have thought him capable of killing Grainger and letting the blame rest on a woman."

"Annersley!" Samuels shouted exultantly. "You saw him do it?"

Miss Jahries, it was clear, was telling us what she believed to be the truth. My relief on Caroline's account was immense, but I turned sick as I thought of Celia. Flique's pink face expressed nothing in particular, I noticed.

"No," Miss Jahries answered, "but I found him in this room going through the safe. He had a pistol."

"Between half-past six and seven Friday night?" Samuels demanded.

"Yes. It was about a quarter of seven when I found him. I had come through the patio window."

"Your alibis are entirely false, then?"

"Practically. Mr. Annersley occupied the chair outside my window from about five minutes of seven until half-past."

"Instead of from half-past six until seven?"

"Yes."

"Wait a minute," Samuels commanded, and he dashed to the patio window. "Kirk!" he shouted. "Find Annersley. He went off along the cliffs a while ago. Bring him here. Get a move on!" Samuels in action was an ominous figure. "All right, Miss Jahries," he said, coming back to us. "Let's have the rest of it."

"Mademoiselle will seat herself," Flique murmured, placing a chair for Miss Jahries.

"I went to my room about half-past six, as I told you," Miss Jahries began. "Just as I was going to lie down I remembered that during the afternoon Miss Ferris had offered to lend me a book I was interested in. She had said she'd left it on one of the chairs in the south terrace. I went to fetch it, going by way of the sun room door. While I was looking around for it I happened to glance at that window." Miss Jahries nodded towards the east window. "The shades weren't drawn quite to and I saw some one lying on the floor in front of the patio window. It looked like Mr. Parados. I went around to the patio window. It was shut, but the latch hadn't caught and I pushed the window open and came in. Mr. Parados was lying just as M. Flique found him, and Mr. Annersley was kneeling in front of the safe. Mr. Annersley jumped to his feet, a pistol in one hand and a bundle of papers in the other, and covered me with the pistol.

" 'Don't move or scream!' he said. Then he closed the window, keeping me covered with the pistol."

"Wait a minute!" Samuels interrupted, at that point. "Would you know that pistol if you saw it again?"

"I think so. It was a heavy automatic and it had a queer pipe-like contrivance on the end of the muzzle."

Samuels opened a drawer of the writing table, an exultant gleam in his eyes.

"Was this it?" he demanded.

To my astonishment, he held up an automatic pistol, a

forty-five. Slipped over the muzzle was the "pipe-like contrivance" of which Miss Jahries had spoken. Evidently it was a recent discovery and certainly it must be the final damning fact against Annersley. I wondered how Celia would take it. She'd need a good deal of faith in her man. Flique's pink face still expressed nothing in particular.

"Mr. Annersley asked me what I intended to do. I accused him of killing Mr. Parados and I told him I should have to report what I had seen. He denied killing Mr. Parados—he would, of course. Mr. Parados had been interfering with Miss Ferris, he said, he had become desperate, and he had entered the library with a crazy notion of frightening Mr. Parados into leaving Miss Ferris and him alone. As if any one could have frightened Mr. Parados! Mr. Annersley said he had found Mr. Parados dead. He hadn't touched him. The safe was open and he had helped himself to certain papers necessary to his financial security. Mr. Annersley kept insisting that he was telling the truth. Of course I didn't believe him and I told him so. Parados deserved a good deal more than he got, I said, but I would have to tell what I had seen. When he saw that my mind was made up he showed me a—paper he had found in the safe. It had my name and Parados' on it. He knew what that meant. He said he had intended to destroy the paper, but if I gave evidence against him he would turn it over to the police."

Miss Jahries' tragic eyes searched Samuels' face.

"I suppose I must tell you about that paper?"

Her voice held the hope that she might not have to, but Samuels nodded and her eyes became more tragic than ever.

"If you don't, Annersley will." Samuels' tone was considerate but firm. You'll probably feel better when you get it off your mind."

"I've nursed it so long that everything is distorted," Miss Jahries went on, her eyes burning with their somber fire. "Ten years ago I was cashier in a roadhouse Parados owned near Los Angeles. He paid me a fair salary, but I came to a crisis in my life. I had to have money—three thousand dollars. The liberty of the man I loved was at stake—never mind what he had done. I forged Parados' name to a check and got the money. He caught me. I supposed he would prosecute me, but he offered me an alternative. Mrs. Parados needed a housekeeper. If I would accept the position he would forget about the check."

Miss Jahries laughed bitterly. "I didn't know Dan Parados then and I thought he was being generous enough to give me a second chance. Generous!" She clenched her hands. "Don't you think I haven't paid him back a thousand times in the only coin he would take? You know what that was. What else had I to give him? Everybody in the house has paid it to him. I've spent ten years of my life watching him live up to his wicked boast that he got his pleasure out of making people fear and hate him. Mrs. Parados, Lum We, Professor Johns, Miss Ferris, Mr. Annersley, Grainger, and I don't know how many more who had gone before, were all victims of his perverted vanity. He hadn't done with me yet. I was such good sport. He would tell me so, laughing in his wicked way.

"You wonder how he tortured me. I'll tell you. When other people—strangers—were around he was the worst. He'd hint in my presence that I had been his mistress, or that I wasn't honest, or that I had a mild form of insanity, or that I was a woman of the streets whom he was trying to redeem, and I'd see disgust come into the eyes of those who heard him. When I cringed he'd laugh in my face. Ten years of that!" Miss Jahries flung up her hands, her face tormented. "I wonder if

I am still sane. If I had broken away from him he would have prosecuted me and that would have meant ruin for the man I had saved. Afterwards, when the man died and my heart died with him I hadn't the courage to try and win back my self-respect. Dan Parados poisoned every life he touched, as he poisoned mine, and I thank God he's dead!"

Miss Jahries covered her face as if she were exhausted. None of us moved. Samuels' cigar had gone out. Flique plucked at his blond mustache and I blinked the moisture out of my eyes. I had not been prepared for such calculated wickedness as this.

"I'm sorry for you, Miss Jahries," Samuels said quietly, at length. "I wish you'd come forward sooner, though. It would have saved Grainger."

"M. Annersley," Flique murmured at this point.

Annersley was standing in the patio window, Kirk behind him. The rigid whiteness of his face made me think of a piece of marble dressed up for an occasion, but his eyes were alive with a black horror that must have come up from the middle of him. He came slowly into the room, his eyes fixed on the automatic which Samuels had laid on the writing table.

"This is a dirty mess you are in, Annersley," Samuels said curtly. "I wish you'd left Grainger alone. You'd better come clean."

Annersley looked at Miss Jahries. She met his eyes with her head up. Neither of them spoke to the other.

"That gun is mine," Annersley said quietly, turning towards Samuels, "and I suppose that petal dropped off the rose I was wearing, but I didn't kill Parados—Grainger, either."

Samuels shrugged. "None of your lies has done you any good, so far, Annersley."

"I am telling you the truth now." Annersley had got himself in hand. "I knew you wouldn't believe me. That

was why I got Miss Jahries to give me an alibi. I did not kill Parados. He was lying on the floor dead when I came through that window."

"Have you the nerve to tell me that two guns equipped with silencers figured in the killing?" Samuels inquired ironically.

"There must have been two," Annersley said earnestly.

Samuels lighted a cigar. "All right," and he laughed. "Where did you get that silencer?"

"You won't believe me, if I tell you."

"Let's hear it, anyhow."

"My flat was broken into one night last year. I'd been out and I got home just as a man was getting away through the window. He didn't hear me come in and I managed to grab a revolver I had in my desk before he saw me. He lifted his own gun—that gun on the table—but I fired first and he dropped outside the window. When I got down he had gone, but I found his gun in the shrubbery and I concluded that I had winged him. The gun was fitted with that silencer. I reported the affair to the police—it's on record, I suppose—but I didn't say anything about the gun and the silencer. I had never seen a silencer, it was a novelty, and I decided to keep it. The crook didn't get away with much."

"Thought it might come in handy, eh?"

"You would say that," Annersley retorted bitterly. "It never occurred to me to do anything with it until a couple of weeks ago when Parados' attitude towards Miss Ferris became unendurable. It didn't enter my head to take his life, although God knows he deserved to lose it, but I wondered if I couldn't threaten him into keeping his hands off Celia. It was a crazy notion—Parados was afraid of nothing on earth—but I had to do something. I was desperate!"

His eyes were smoking again and I think all of us felt the terrific urge behind his words.

"I mulled the notion over. It stuck in my head. Then I remembered the silencer on that gun. If I shoved the gun in Parados' ugly face and told him I'd blow his head off if he didn't leave Celia alone, the silencer would give the threat a realistic touch that might make Parados think I meant what I said. I got the notion about the silencer Friday morning. It wouldn't let go. I was in a pretty bad way by then—nearly equal to making the threat good, I guess—and when I came over here Saturday afternoon—ostensibly to see Celia—I had the gun with me.

"Hunt was right. The gun was under that newspaper. I had thought Parados was alone. It shook me, finding Hunt there, and I tried to put the notion out of my mind. I couldn't. I guess I was crazy. Anyhow, I went back again and this time I found Parados dead on the floor. He got what he deserved, whoever did it. The safe stood open and I got the papers I wanted about the Fleetwood deal. Miss Jahries' check, too. I had a pretty good idea what the check meant. Miss Jahries came in then. That's all."

As Annersley's voice ceased, leaving a tension in the air, I found myself wondering if he might not be innocent, after all. He wasn't, of course. It was just an illusion of innocence that he had given me.

"Where are those papers?" Samuels demanded.

"I destroyed them. Miss Jahries' check, too." Annersley looked at Miss Jahries, who had not moved from her chair. "You may be interested to know that I should never have used it against you."

"What have you got to say about Grainger?" Samuels demanded abruptly.

"Nothing," Annersley replied wearily. "I have told you the truth. You don't believe me. You'd better send me over."

"Claude, what are you saying?"

Celia at that instant flew across the floor towards him. Annersley caught her in his arms and held her tight.

"Claude, what is it? What are they doing to you?"

"Hush, dear!"

"But you must tell me! You said something about father. What is the matter? I insist on knowing!"

She pushed him back and hammered on his chest, his arms still encircling her shoulders.

"You are going to be brave, dear?"

"Oh, Claude, tell me what has happened!"

"It'll turn out all right. Mr. Samuels doesn't understand."

"It's about—Parados—again?"

"Yes, dear. Miss Jahries has told them. I suppose it had to come out. We shouldn't have tried to hide it."

"Father, too?"

"Yes, darling. But you mustn't expect Samuels to have your faith. You are going to be brave? They won't hold me long, Celia."

She whirled out of his arms and towards Samuels, her fury a honey-colored flame that drove the deputy back a step.

"How dare you accuse him of such an abominable thing! If you'd just said he'd killed that brute Parados I could have understood it. But to say he murdered my father! How dare you! Are you crazy, or blind, or just cruel? Are you trying to involve an innocent man because you are not intelligent enough to find out who is guilty?"

Samuels was dumb before Celia's magnificent fury. I doubt if anything he could have said would have quenched it. Celia had paused for an instant; but now, to my horror, she shifted her attack.

"Why don't you ask Miss Brent what *she* knows?" Celia, hysterical now, pointed an accusing finger at Caroline, who had just appeared at the door with Mrs. Para-

dos. "What is she doing here? Didn't Parados insult her? Didn't she force her way into the house, like a thief? Isn't she a thief? Wasn't she caught trying to steal a valuable painting, a few minutes after Parados was shot? Isn't she the only one in the house who hadn't an alibi both Friday night and last night? Yet you accuse Claude of murdering my father! Wouldn't *I* know if he had done it? Wouldn't I—oh, Claude—"

Annersley took Celia into his arms again and held her with all his strength while she wept against his shoulder. I turned towards Caroline who was leaning against the door frame as if she had been whipped.

"Try not to mind, dear," I said gently. "Annersley is in a bad mess—she doesn't know what she is saying—"

"The girl is crazy," Mrs. Parados interposed coldly. "I'm sick of her hysterics. She probably knows all about it. You had better take her along with Annersley, Mr. Samuels."

Mrs. Parados at this, turned her back on us and went out.

"You don't think Celia really believed what she said?" Caroline whispered, shuddering.

"Of course not!" I maintained stoutly, taking her hands. "Don't you see what is facing her?"

"Yes. Her father—and now Mr. Annersley. It's pitiful beyond belief. I wish she would let me help her. It does help to tell some one else, you know." Caroline shivered, her eyes tragic. "None of us will be quite the same after this, Allan."

I had been sure of this, in a somewhat different sense, for a good while. It would not be necessary to explain that difference to Caroline, I knew, as I looked down into her eyes. She colored a little, but her eyes gazed unwaveringly up into mine and I drew her close. It was one of those precious moments that give purpose to life.

Samuels broke the little crystal ball we had blown around ourselves with a sharp lift of his voice.

"Kirk, you turned Lum We loose?"

"Last night," the big man answered.

"Take Annersley over there and lock him up. I'm not yet ready to take him to headquarters. And tell Gridley to hop over with that gun and have Geddes look at it. Geddes has the bullets that rubbed out Parados and Grainger. Tell Gridley to bring his report back with him."

"If the marks on the bullets match the rifling of the pistol I am guilty—is that it?" Annersley suddenly inquired over Celia's shoulder.

"That's it," Samuels grunted. "They'll match," he added grimly. "Get along with him, Kirk."

As the big man led Annersley towards the door Caroline timidly approached Celia, who was clinging to Annersley's arm; but as the weeping girl lifted her head the hatred in her eyes drove Caroline back, trembling.

Flique at that moment took it into his pink head to halt the doleful procession.

"Another question, M. Annersley," he said brightly.

"I thought they'd all been asked," Annersley retorted.

Flique chuckled and twirled his mustache. "Just a little question, *mon ami,* but of an immense significance. It is this: When you entered by that patio window to find M. Parados dead on the floor, was the window open or shut? Monsieur will think carefully. *C'est tres important."* Flique's blue eyes shown like bits of enamel.

"The window was open," Annersley replied.

Flique bowed. *"Merci,* monsieur," and he twirled his mustache again.

The little procession passed into the hall.

XXII

FLIQUE GROPES IN THE DUST

LUM WE signalized his re-establishment as a "tender bloom in the garden of innocence," as he put it, by preparing us an excellent breakfast. Our response must have disappointed him, for only Anatole Flique, having tucked his napkin under his chin, partook of the food with any degree of enthusiasm.

Miss Jahries' evidence was conclusive, so conclusive, indeed, that it had not needed the inadequacy of Annersley's explanation to confirm it; yet throughout the meal I was haunted by a baffling sense of incompleteness. As soon as we had risen from the table I followed Flique into the sun room, although I knew he would not tell me any more than he wanted me to know.

"Monsieur is bewildered?" he inquired, settling himself into a gayly cushioned chair.

"Did Annersley kill Parados and Grainger?" I demanded abruptly.

"He chuckled. "Has not M. le Deputy—?"

"Never mind M. le Deputy," I interrupted irritably. "Can't you answer a straight question?"

"*Mon ami,* it will not do, the simple yes or no, when I cannot prove what I know. You see? Life is—um—that imbecile English! The word, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"Complex—is that what you mean?"

"*Précisément!*" and he bowed. "I know who killed those excellent fellows and—" He paused deliberately.

"Yes?"

"And I do not know. That is clear?"

"Quite," I answered dryly. "You mean you won't

tell me what you know until you are ready. All right. But you infer that Annersley is innocent. How can you believe that in face of such overwhelming evidence to the contrary? Everybody else in the house has at least one alibi—"

"Mlle. Brent," Flique interposed.

"You know very well that Miss Brent had nothing to do with it."

"Monsieur's tenderness ripens in the sun of mademoiselle's regard," Flique remarked oracularly, beaming. "Also, there is Mlle. Ferris."

"But she is Grainger's daughter!" I exclaimed. "Surely you don't accuse her of killing her father?"

"I have accused no one," Flique retorted, spreading his hands. "You tell me that everybody in the house has an alibi and I correct you. What are these alibis, I ask you again? Have not we broken two of them? May we not break another?"

"All of them look pretty sound to me," I said.

"*Eh bien,* we shall see. Monsieur," he continued, regarding me earnestly, "the human spirit is an eagle that soars towards the—how you say?—unattainable. Perhaps it is the true philosophy, a wine of the gods, the machine of perpetual motion, a perfect crime. Am I not right? And does it not fall with the broken wing? Always, I assure you," and Anatole Flique twirled his mustache. "So it is with the 'perfect alibi' of the guilty man. It has not existence. It is not—um—of the human mind. Always there is the fault for the inward eye to discover—the inward eye of Anatole Flique, perhaps. But I am generous. We shall look at our principal clews.

"We had first—what were they? The indiscretion of Mlle. Brent, a price ticket in the dead hand of monsieur, a rose petal, two roses, the blackness poor Grainger trod into the carpet, the broken compartment in that safe, and the green bird that is broken in two. But do I enthuse?

Not so. And why, you ask? Because they were not of the living tissue, all those. Did I not tell you?"

"Not even that price ticket?" I demanded. "Millionaires aren't shot with thirty-five-cent price tags in their hands every day."

"Ah, that! A curious affair, *mais oui,* but not of the living tissue. I cannot tell you why. A secondary matter, perhaps. We shall see. And then poor Grainger is killed and what have we?" Flique's voice took a higher, vibrant pitch. "Is it not then that we behold the living tissue and Anatole Flique is enthused? Grainger is shot in front of the fireplace as he lights the fire, an empty shell lies on the floor, the telephone is upset, a trifle of steel shaving is found in Grainger's pocket, the patio window is open, and—monsieur, this is of the prime importance! That window was *open* when M. Annersley entered the room on Friday night! Did he not assure us that it was he who closed it? There, my friend," and Flique spread his hands engagingly, "it is an open book. You have but to turn the pages. *Alors,* you will not tell me you cannot read what is written?"

"You spoke of a flaw in somebody's alibi," I said, ignoring his challenge. "Is this later evidence the flaw you mean?"

"Précisément."

"Le Balafré and Bec are out, then?"

"I did not say so, M. l'Antiquaire."

"But they have no alibis to break!" I exclaimed, exasperated. "Moreover, both affairs imply a familiarity with the house and the movements of those in it which le Balafré and Bec could not have had."

"C'est vrai," Flique chuckled, "yet I insist that those little ones have their place in this—um—tragic mosaic."

"Those advertisements in the Marseilles newspapers are significant, then?"

"Immensely so."

"And if they are, Dan Parados was Jules Lacôte, the man who betrayed Bec and le Balafré!" I continued.

"Ah!" Flique exclaimed, beaming. "That I do not know."

"It is consoling to learn that there is something you do not know," I retorted.

"Anatole Flique is the principal agent of *la Sureté,*" the little man reminded me seriously, "but he is not infallible."

Fortunately, Manning appeared at that moment, a duster in her hand and seemingly anxious to set the room in order. Flique got up.

"'The morning beckons to us with a jewel on her finger,' as the admirable Lum We would say," he murmured. "Let us leave the good Manning to her duties."

As we stepped out onto the terrace, Flique glanced at the outside stair that led up the west side of the east wing to the flat roof above the sun room. This was the stair I had noticed on Friday night when I had come onto the terrace looking for Annersley's newspaper.

"So charming are these Californian—um—adaptations of our old-world architecture," Flique remarked, picking his words with care. "Consider that little stair. So enchantingly placed and so admirably useless. Is it not a perfect expression of the—how you say?—romantic indolence of the Spanish character? But yes. Who would deny it? I shall wager you an O.K. cigar that it is never used. Oh, my good Manning," and Flique tapped on one of the windows of the sun room.

The girl came running.

"That stair there, *ma fille,*" Flique said. "Is it ever used?"

"Hardly ever, sir," Manning assured us in an injured tone. "It's just another pile of steps for us servants to keep swept."

"But that, my little one—is it not a labor of love? Could it be otherwise in this temple of beauty?"

"Oh, go on with you, Mr. Flique," and Manning giggled behind her duster. "I'm not anybody's 'little one'." The giggle faded into the white vacuity of her face. "And it's no temple of beauty, sir—inside, anyhow. It's a wicked house and I don't care who hears me say so."

"The virtue of mademoiselle redeems it," Flique said, bowing solemnly. And then, with a sprightly air: "It intrigues me, that little stair. Whose chamber do I see at the top of it?"

"Mrs. Parados'," Manning said.

"Ah! And there is a door. It opens into madame's chamber?"

"Well, not exactly," Manning replied. "You see, there's a bedroom and a bathroom and a—you know, a little hall, in between."

"And the roof door I see up there opens into the little hall—is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

Flique beamed. "It is clear that mademoiselle is a woman of intelligence."

"I try to make the best of the talents that were given to me, sir," Manning said unctuously.

"Who could doubt it?" Flique inquired cordially, and I wondered what his game was, it being quite clear by this that he had one. "And now, mademoiselle," he continued, "you will remember that monsieur was killed between half-past six and seven on Friday evening?"

"Indeed I do, Mr. Flique."

"And you were with madame every moment of that tragic half hour, yes?"

"I was, sir. I told Mr. Samuels so, too."

"*Mais oui.* That is to say, you were with madame every moment of that half hour except, of course, for the —was it ten minutes?—in which she bathed?"

"Of course, sir," and Manning simpered. "Mistress bathes herself, sir—"

"To be sure," Flique chuckled. "And when she had prepared herself for the bath and slipped on her green robe—"

"Her blue robe, sir. Her robin's-egg blue—"

"Imbecile that I am!" Flique cried vehemently. "Her robin's-egg blue, to be sure! And then she went into the hall that opens into the bathroom, shutting the bedroom door behind her, while you, my little one, plied your twinkling needle—"

"Why, yes, I did, sir. Mistress being economical and all that, I was letting out one of her gowns."

Flique bowed acquiescently. "But madame went into the little hall, shutting the door behind her—?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Flique."

"And perhaps she had one hand thrust deep into a pocket of her robin's-egg blue gown? No? I am wrong?"

"Oh, but she had, sir!" Manning burst forth excitedly. "She seemed to be holding something tight and I wondered what it was."

"Mademoiselle would, being a woman of intelligence," Flique murmured gravely. "But Madame was—um—nervous, perhaps? In a perplexity, *non?*"

"Yes, she was," Manning cried, glowing. "All upset. But I didn't think much of it, for Mr. Parados never treated her properly."

"A man of bronze, that one!" Flique declared feelingly.

"He was so. But she needn't have snapped at me the way she did when I showed her that little stone I found on the carpet."

"A little green stone?" Flique murmured solicitously.

"That's all it was, sir," Manning continued warmly. "I showed it to her and she knocked it out of my hand. I thought she was going to slap my face. Really I did, sir."

"Tck, tck," Flique clucked deploringly. "Mademoiselle has her problem. But who has not, I ask you?"

"That's right, sir," Manning sighed piously. "We all have our crosses. It wouldn't be good for us if we hadn't."

"Mademoiselle has the philosophy, also," Flique beamed, and he chucked Manning under the chin. "But this little green stone—you have it, *oui?*"

"No, sir, I haven't. When I looked for it, it was gone. Mistress must have picked it up."

Flique shrugged. "A nothing," he murmured casually. "It happened, this, after madame had bathed?"

"Yes, sir. You always guess right, Mr. Flique."

"Mademoiselle tempts me to try again," Flique said, bowing. "Tell me, when madame entered her bathroom you heard—um—water running?"

"Yes, I did," and Manning nodded vehemently. "For maybe four or five minutes it was, too. It surprised me for I'd always prided myself on having mistress's bath just right. Maybe that's what made her so touchy." Manning's face at this became troubled and she began to pluck at her apron. "I don't know why you are asking me all these questions, Mr. Flique. I do hope I'm not saying anything I shouldn't."

"Non, non," Flique protested, spreading his plump hands engagingly. "Mademoiselle is a jewel of discretion. Those questions—*pouf!* What are they but to settle a point with M. l'Antiquaire?" It is done. Mademoiselle may return to her duties."

Reassured, Manning departed, tittering into her duster, and Flique regarded me with a twinkle.

"Well, my friend?"

"Flique," I said, controlling my voice with difficulty, "you have broken two more alibis."

"Sound and solid were they not, those alibis?"

"They looked so." I paused. A mass of undigested

theory was fermenting in my mind, but my experiences of the past three days had taught me the folly of jumping at conclusions, if they had taught me nothing else. "Flique," I proceeded cautiously, "what was in the pocket of Mrs. Parados' gown—her robin's-egg blue gown?"

"You have not guessed? *Est-ce possible?*"

"I wouldn't have asked you if I had," I retorted, exasperated by the pretended astonishment in his tone. "Sometimes I wonder if your front of superior wisdom conceals any more than the rest of us know!"

Flique chuckled, seemingly undisturbed by my silly outburst.

"Was not Friday madame's birthday and the anniversary of her marriage to monsieur?" he inquired meaningly. Then he shrugged. "But you know that."

If this was intended to enlighten me, it didn't, although I had an uneasy feeling that it ought to. On Friday evening Flique, I recalled, had offered Mrs. Parados his congratulations on the double significance of the day. She had received them with a good deal of perturbation, but I wasn't prepared to construe her reaction to them as evidence of guilt. Nor was I ready to believe that it was a pistol which Mrs. Parados held in the pocket of her gown as she went into the little hall that gave separate access to the room, bathroom and roof, significant as was the breaking of her alibi. Flique's deduction concerning Mrs. Parados' movements and mental state just before she passed out of sight of her maid were diabolically clever, even if he had had some basis of fact to build on, but the evidence of Annersley's guilt was too overpoweringly strong for me to entertain seriously an opposite theory.

Flique said no more, and as I had resolved to keep my questions to myself for the time being, at least, we passed out of the patio in silence. My mind continued to struggle with this new aspect of the case Manning had so innocently illuminated and I did not notice that we were

approaching the garage until we were almost upon it. Flique glanced towards the south end in which Annersley was imprisoned, but the north end, which served as power house and workshop, proved to be his destination.

He prowled around the room with a tense and watchful look in his eyes, paying little attention to the power plant, but enormously interested in the lathe—a screw cutting lathe, I thought it was. I trailed him silently, tormented with curiosity, but keeping my tongue between my teeth. Suddenly, a long steel rod which leaned against the wall behind the lathe attracted his attention and he pounced upon it.

"Cre nom de nom!" he whispered, and I was startled by his vibrant tone.

The rod, which was rusted here and there, was some four feet long and perhaps a quarter of an inch thick. One end of it was fitted into a sort of "head" slightly thicker than the rod itself. In this head was sunk an adjustable tooth-like device, the tooth being almost flush with the "head." The rod told me nothing, but Flique's blue eyes were shining with excitement.

"What is it?" I demanded, forgetting my resolve.

"Mon dieu, you do not know?" he demanded passionately.

I could have bitten my tongue off, but his next move made me forget my resentment. Dropping onto his knees, he began to grope feverishly in the dust and dirt and scraps of metal beneath the lathe. I watched him, fascinated, half inclined to doubt his sanity.

After some minutes of meticulous groping he exclaimed again, straightened, and got up, his china-blue eyes positively ecstatic.

"Will you observe that, M. l'Antiquaire?" he inquired triumphantly.

In the palm of his grimy hand lay a fragment of spiraled steel shaving similar to the one he had found in

Grainger's pocket, but an inch or so longer. It told me nothing except that Grainger had been machining some object on his lathe, and I admitted as much. Flique chuckled and twirled his mustache.

"Grainger, you think?" He dropped the shavings into an envelope. "Well, we shall see. My friend, they are living tissue, those shavings and that steel rod, and you do not perceive it is so." He shook his pink head sorrowfully, although the twinkle remained in his eyes. "But you have not the inward eye. *Quel dommage!*"

"They really tell you something?" I asked, breaking my resolution again.

"They tell me everything, monsieur. It was done by a clever one, that trick, and it is well that Anatole Flique is here." He twirled his mustache again. "To-night we shall open the heart of our big mystery. First, the little mysteries, then the big mystery—*c'est la vie.* But there are many things to do yet and perhaps mademoiselle is waiting for monsieur—" He paused and shrugged.

Clearly, he wanted me to go and I left him, puzzling over what I had seen and heard and thoroughly disgusted with my inability to perceive the significance of that steel rod and those scraps of steel shaving. It occurred to me that his activity in the case was nothing more nor less than a gigantic piece of bluff which I had reinforced with my own credulity, but I did not entertain the notion long. There was something staunch and real about Flique, notwithstanding his curious mannerisms.

I was still groping when I came upon Caroline in the pergola. She wanted to know what was the matter.

"I have just left Flique," I explained, dropping beside her, "and I'm beginning to wonder if the Lord forgot to endow me with brains. Flique sees meaning in everything. He insists that he has read the riddle, but he won't tell me the answer. I feel like a fool."

Caroline put her fingers on my lips.

"You are too near to it, Allan," she said gently. "So am I." Her eyes filled with tears. "Can't we get away for a little while—up the hill—where the sun shines—" Her voice broke and I took her hands.

"Something has happened again, dear?"

She nodded, shivering. "That dress of Celia's—the little georgette, you know—"

"Yes?"

"I gave it back to her. She ripped it to shreds—stamped on it—kicked it—oh, Allan, she said dreadful things!"

"Try not to think about them," I pleaded, after a moment. "Celia is crazy with grief. She couldn't be otherwise. It'll come right soon. To-night, maybe. Flique said so." I slipped my arm around Caroline and did what the pounding of her heart asked me to. "Perhaps we can get Lum We to put us up a lunch."

Lum We, it turned out, was delighted to and we departed with half a chicken, two thirds of a lemon pie, and a bottle of milk in a leather satchel.

There are moments in the lives of all of us which are precious only because they are secret, and it is nobody's business what Caroline and I did with ourselves during the rest of the morning and the early afternoon. Towards four o'clock we came to the most northerly point of the ridge. Below us, on the east side, was the abandoned fishing village which had been occupied by Portuguese settlers until Parados had bought the island and turned them out of their homes. We had been hoping that we would find it.

Three wharves rotted on their piles in the mauve mirror of the cove. The bleached ribs of a variety of small craft embedded in the white sand had the mournful air of a prehistoric graveyard. A huddle of sheds occupied the center of the settlement and from either side of it extended

a score or so of frame and adobe houses, most of them fallen in upon themselves like mushrooms withered in a hot sun. Chimneys were gone; doors stood agape, their approaches smothered by sand or choked by ice-plant. A tiny church had lost its steeple.

The disintegration of the place depressed and angered me. This was the wickedest thing Dan Parados had ever done, I thought. A trail that led down the steep slope looked passable, but neither of us was inclined to try it.

"It would spoil everything," Caroline said, shuddering. "That man's hatred is everywhere. If it hadn't been for Grainger—"

She paused and I nodded. Annersley—if it were he—had done society a definite service. If it had not been for Grainger I should have been inclined to congratulate him. But Grainger made all the difference. I was sorry for Celia. There is nothing like sheer terror for turning a man into something else.

Caroline must have read my thought.

"You are sure it was Annersley?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Aren't you?" I countered.

"Yes, I suppose so." Her tone was still doubtful. "I had a silly sort of an idea—" She paused, frowning.

"What is it?" I pressed.

I thought she was going to tell me, but she shook her head instead.

"No, it's just a crazy notion that occurred to me. It wouldn't be fair to tell you. Too much has been said about—about people who couldn't have done it. It must have been Annersley. Miss Jahries caught him with the pistol in his hand."

"You might as well tell me," I urged. "Are you thinking about Mrs. Parados? That Flique broke her alibi, I mean?"

But she wouldn't say any more and I did not press her. Caroline had a way of meaning what she said that had surprised me once or twice.

Suddenly, she caught my arm.

"I thought I saw some one down there," she exclaimed. "On that center wharf."

"I didn't notice any one," I replied. "I was looking that way, too. You must have been mistaken."

"Isn't that like a man?" she cried indignantly. "Let's watch for a minute or two."

We watched for perhaps five minutes, but nothing living moved upon the wharf.

"Well?" I said.

"No," Caroline declared emphatically, "I don't think I was mistaken."

In a little while we started back.

XXIII

THE GREEN STONE

After Caroline had gone up to her room I found myself with a couple of hours to dispose of before dinner. Usually, time does not hang on my hands, but the ruin of the little village had depressed our spirits and left me, now that Caroline was gone, in a restless mood which drove me about the place in search of Flique. The little man was not to be found, and as no one could tell me where he was I set off around The Gut, intending to inflict myself upon Professor Johns.

The sun was gone when I left and by the time I got to the fort darkness had come on. I heard voices and, a moment later, came upon Flique and Johns chatting in front of the tower door. Flique, I saw, had a game bag slung over his shoulder and a small rifle in his hand.

"Monsieur has the melancholy look," he remarked facetiously as I drew near. "Has *la petite demoiselle* abandoned him?"

"Why the rifle?" I inquired, when I had greeted Johns.

Flique chuckled. "That excellent Lum We promised me a fried rabbit for breakfast if I should bring him one in."

"And you got one?"

Flique patted the game bag, the flap of which was strapped down.

"I am an excellent shot, monsieur," he said frankly. "Lum We assured me the fat ones lived over here."

"Probably they do," I said, grinning. "Professor Johns keeps a lettuce patch for them."

"M. le Professeur does not approve of my hunt," Flique chuckled, twirling his mustache and eying the professor whimsically. "Is it not so, monsieur?"

"I do not approve of taking life unless it cannot be avoided," Professor Johns answered warmly. "But I am not a crank. At least, I hope I'm not. I believe a man has a right to please himself."

"A wise word, that. It is all very well, no doubt, this passion for the birds and the fishes and the rabbits, but it is not the way of Anatole Flique. Man must eat, and to eat he must kill." Flique patted his plump stomach. "Anyhow, I shall enjoy my rabbit. Your animals kill, do they not?"

"They are as nature made them," Professor Johns replied. "As a scientist, I accept the cruelty of nature as necessary to the continuation of life; as a human being, I deny it." He laughed bitterly. "When the hurts of life are too sharp I console myself with Omar's verse. You remember the one about conspiring with love and fate to shatter the scheme of things and remold it nearer to the heart's desire?"

"Monsieur is a philosopher," Flique beamed. "But are we not as we are made, yes—saint and assassin?"

"You mean nothing can change us?" Professor Johns said thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure of that. Parados, now—could anything have changed him? I doubt it. He was always what he was when he fell dead. But what about the one who killed him? Parados blighted every personality he touched. Might not the seed of murder in the heart of the one who killed him have been planted there by Parados himself?"

"Monsieur intrigues me," Flique murmured. "But will not the seed of murder that is planted in the—um—essentially good heart die because there is no—um—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?" Flique demanded sharply.

"Nourishment for it," I suggested.

"Précisément! I thank you. . . . Monsieur comprehends?"

Monsieur did, it appeared, but he stuck to his guns, nevertheless, his brown eyes kindling fiercely.

"And if the seed brings its own nourishment, M. Flique —what then?" Professor Johns took off his glasses. "We who have known Parados over a period of years—his wife, myself, Miss Celia, Mr. Annersley, Miss Jahries, average men and women, all of us—do you think Parados did not touch us with his evil genius? Monsieur, I predict"—Johns hesitated as if he were questioning the wisdom of giving utterance to what was in his mind, then he went valiantly on—"I predict that when you put your hand on the one who killed Parados and Grainger it will be upon one of our own group."

"A serious charge, *mon ami,*" Flique said, frowning. "Yourself, now—one of this average group—you could have killed M. Parados, yes?"

"Dear me." Professor Johns was smiling now and polishing his glasses. "I am getting into deep water, aren't I? You have a way of reaching down to the root of a question." His face became grave then, and his voice vibrated as he went on. "Yes," he said, "if Parados had torn down this building—every brick and timber of it is bone of my bone, as I told you!—I—I think I could have killed him."

We were quiet for a minute or so after that. Professor Johns did not attempt to conceal the play of emotion on his face.

"It took the courage to say that, my friend," Flique said simply.

Professor Johns laughed unsteadily. "Here I am boring you with my theories. That is one of the results of living alone. Won't you come inside? Hunt hasn't been in the tower."

Flique accepted the invitation and we preceded Johns

into the tower, the ground floor of which was occupied by firewood, gardening tools, and packing cases. A stair gave access to the floor above and on ascending it we found ourselves in a comfortable square room which evidently served as living quarters and study. Two of the adobe walls were covered with books—scientific and philosophical works from Aristotle to Freud and John Dewey predominating, I presently discovered. Shabby chairs, a picture or two, several warm-looking rugs, and a battered desk upon which stood a lamp, a pair of field glasses, and a telephone reflected the engaging friendliness I had found in Professor Johns as closely as material things ever reflect human personality. The desk stood by the north window which would give at daylight an excellent view of the house on the other side of The Gut. Lights marked the positions of many of the windows and I was able to see the fireplace and writing table in the library and the gayly cushioned chairs in the sun room.

We chatted for perhaps an hour and a half and both Johns and Flique revealed themselves as exceptionally well-informed men. When Hendricks, the boatman, appeared with a bundle of text books under his arm, we got up to go.

"You have an excellent teacher!" Flique exclaimed.

"The best in the world," Hendricks grinned. "But he keeps me right at it."

"German, is it?" Flique grimaced his disgust as Hendricks nodded and Johns smiled. "M. le Professeur should have the French. Come, is it not the tongue of beauty and wit and wisdom?"

"I am quite ignorant of it," Professor Johns laughed, "but Hendricks has proved himself such an apt pupil that I am half inclined to take it up on his account."

Johns was not dining at the house, he informed us, but he said he would walk over after dinner. As we took our departure, Flique gave me the rifle to carry.

The Gut was at the height of its fury again and we proceeded along the edge of it in silence. I was glad that Flique was quiet. A crescent moon hung low in the west and the waters coiling in The Gut shone like pythons' eyes. I wrenched my gaze away from their sleek wickedness.

"Flique," I said, "Johns couldn't have shot Parados and Grainger with a pistol from the tower, could he?"

"Impossible," Flique replied. "A pistol cannot be fired with the accuracy at such a distance. *Non, non,* it was not M. le Professeur's pistol that killed Messieurs Parados and Grainger."

"It couldn't have been," I nodded, and we went on in silence again.

As we drew near to the house I noticed that we were walking faster. My first thought was that Flique had gradually quickened our pace, then I realized that it wasn't that. A common impulse was driving us on. We were wanted at the house. I did not look at Flique, nor he at me, but the stroke of our legs grew faster. We were running as we came up to the patio window.

Samuels was drumming impatiently on the writing table. Kirk and Gridley were twirling their hats. Mrs. Parados and Miss Jahries occupied chairs in front of Samuels. Clearly, we had stumbled upon some sort of a situation. Samuels turned his harassed face towards us. The glitter of green and white stones and gold-colored chain on the writing table caught my eyes. I started involuntarily towards it, then stopped. It was a trashy thing. . . . A bit of cotton was attached to the chain . . . and it might have been worth thirty-five cents.

Thirty-five cents.

"I've about made up my mind to quit my job and join the movie police, Flique," Samuels burst forth explosively.

"Monsieur is unjust to himself," Flique protested.

"What is it? That the bullets which killed Messieurs Parados and Grainger were not fired from M. Annersley's pistol? *Pouf!* You will commence again."

"You knew?"

"Could it be otherwise?"

"Oh, all right. Gridley has just come back with Captain Geddes' report. Neither of those bullets was fired from Annersley's gun—unless he had two guns, both of 'em equipped with silencers, and that's nonsense. He must have told the truth, unbelievable as it seems. I have had to let him go. Miss Ferris is with him somewhere—tickled to death, of course."

"It *was* the truth that he told, my friend," Flique said gravely.

"And now this thing turns up," Samuels continued wearily, and he tossed the gaudy pendant to Flique who caught it deftly, an unreadable look in his eyes. "Miss Jahries found it in the patio. The string on it matches the string on that tag that was in Parados' hand."

"But yes," Flique said amiably. "And where did mademoiselle find this trifle?"

"Tell him, Miss Jahries," Samuels grunted.

"I was watering the shrubbery in the patio," the housekeeper explained evenly. "It was buried under the coprosma in front of the sun room. I shouldn't have found it if the water from the hose hadn't loosened the earth. Mrs. Parados was on the terrace and we both thought Mr. Samuels should have it."

"It was what you had been looking for," Mrs. Parados said dispassionately.

Flique had been fingering the green stones of the pendant with a singular avidity of touch, but as Mrs. Parados said this he spread the trashy thing out on his palm. My heart jumped.

One of the green stones was missing.

I glanced surreptitiously at Mrs. Parados. Her eyes

were riveted upon Flique's face. She seemed to be crouching behind her defenses. Was this the end?

"We've got to go back to the beginning, Flique," Samuels went on with a touch of his old arrogance. "The price tag and that pendant are the fundamental clews. When we know who left the tag in Parados' hand I'll be ready to call it a day."

Flique seemed surprised. *"Mon dieu!"* he exclaimed, spreading his hands, "you do not know that?" His face became stern—sterner than I had ever seen it and he looked straight at Mrs. Parados. "Madame shall tell us," he said. "This pendant is hers."

XXIV

A SERPENT IN THE HAND

We had two seconds of intolerable silence before Mrs. Parados sprang to her feet. She could not speak for another moment. Innumerable little muscles had come to life in her face and made the brittle mask behind which Mrs. Parados lived sinuous and flexible.

"That is a wicked lie!" she exclaimed furiously.

But the vehemence of her tone defeated its purpose, in that it left me, at least, with the conviction that she and not Flique had uttered the lie. I had never considered seriously the possibility that Mrs. Parados was guilty, but it did not occur to me to doubt that Flique would prove his case.

Flique bowed. "Madame is emphatic, but I repeat: this pendant is hers."

"How dare you say such a thing! Are you accusing me of murder? Look at it!" Mrs. Parados pointed a quivering finger at the pendant. "What was the price tag on it—thirty-five cents? Do you mean to say that a woman in my position would own such a thing?" She turned savagely upon Samuels, her voice unpleasantly shrill. "Who is in charge of this investigation? You or Flique? Are you going to permit him to accuse me of murdering my husband? Haven't you any ideas of your own? What kind of a police officer do you call yourself?"

Flique's accusation had thrown Samuels off his balance, but he got hold of himself again.

"We shall hear what M. Flique has got to say, Mrs. Parados," he said grimly. "You'd better sit down. All right, Flique."

"If madame will permit?" the little man inquired.

Mrs. Parados dropped into her chair, fighting for control of herself.

"Go ahead," she whispered.

"It is a long story," Flique began cautiously, as if he were feeling his way. "And there are many blanks—"

"You are telling it!" Mrs. Parados said passionately.

"*Mais oui.* But madame will help." Flique's eyes were luminous and supremely wise and I wondered if they saw into the dark whirlpool of Mrs. Parados' thoughts. "You have told us that it was monsieur's delight to—how you say—humiliate you. There were other women, perhaps?"

"Yes." The single word scorched the ear. I thought of it as measuring the depth of Mrs. Parados' hatred. "Didn't he even bring his women home with him?"

"And so, madame, your affection for monsieur became hatred?"

"Could it have become anything else? I've told you this before—I tell you again. He wanted fear and hatred—and that was all he wanted. I did not give him fear, but I did hate him—with every fiber of my body. Didn't he trample underfoot every ideal I ever had? Yes, I had a few, once! Didn't he humiliate me before my friends? Didn't he drive people away from me—he and his cheap women? Didn't he offer me every conceivable insult, little and big, that entered his head? He liked to see me squirm. He said so! Only I didn't squirm enough to please him. I hated him enough to kill him, but I didn't kill him. Remember that!"

"Madame was too wise, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

Flique twirled his mustache. "And so madame conceived *l'idee magnifique* of her revenge?"

Mrs. Parados clenched her hands. "I don't know what you mean."

Flique leaned forward, wagging a plump finger.

"Madame will remember those little ones, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec, who escaped from *l'Ile du Diable* seven months ago? It was a notable escape. The journals everywhere were full of it."

"Yes." The word seeped through Mrs. Parados' clenched teeth. "Why?"

"Madame," Flique continued gently, "it was a month after that notable escape that the notices about the jade phœnix of M. Parados began to appear in the Marseilles journals."

The little muscles at the corners of Mrs. Parados' mouth and nose began to quiver again. They might have been trying to wriggle their way to the surface, so assiduously did they pluck at the white skin. I felt as if I were looking at something under a microscope.

"I don't know what you mean," Mrs. Parados whispered.

"Have the perceptions of madame lost their subtlety?" Flique inquired, spreading his hands. "I speak of madame's discovery . . . that monsieur was the famous Jules Lacôte . . . the accomplice of le Balafré and Cicéron Bec . . . whom he betrayed. Madame will remember that when those little ones robbed the *Banque du Midi* a patron of the bank was shot. And who was that patron but the merchant of antiques from whom the infamous Lacôte had bought his lucky piece, that jade phœnix, the day before? Ah, but madame was clever! Too clever to kill monsieur, whom she hated. *Non, non,* she will have Messieurs le Balafré and Bec, who have just come out of the black horror of that *Ile du Diable,* to which the infamous Lacôte had betrayed them, attend to that little matter. And so madame puts her notices in the Marseilles journals. Does she not know that those wretched ones will be hungry for news of the city of their birth? It was an astonishing cleverness, that revenge! A

brilliance! Madame has the genius." Flique bowed ironically.

A drop of blood trembled upon Mrs. Parados' lower lip. She shut her eyes and clenched her hands and bit a little deeper into her lip. I wished I could look away from her.

Flique had placed his words with the skill of a clever general who plans an advance along a dangerous front without too many troops at his disposal, and I rather thought he was relying on his own shrewd conception of the truth to force from Mrs. Parados an acknowledgment that she had inserted the advertisements, rather than upon actual proof of the fact. But whether this was so or not, Mrs. Parados either thought he had proof, or became weary of the lie she had been living, for she suddenly flung her head up defiantly, opened her eyes, and broke into a torrent of words.

"Yes, I did insert that advertisement. I hoped it would bring those men here. And I hoped they'd send a bullet into Dan's black heart and make it possible for me to live again! There! I don't care. It's out. I'm glad. I suppose you want to know how I knew about Dan and those men and the phœnix. It came about in this way.

"Dan was always bragging, especially after he'd been drinking. He'd brag about his women and his money and his shrewdness and the men he'd broken. The more he bragged the more I hated him. One evening, a few days after that escape from Devil's Island, he drank enough to make him talkative and he boasted that he had sent those two men there twenty-five years ago. He said something about that bank robbery and the phœnix—connecting them with le Balafré and Bec and another man named Jules Lacôte. I didn't believe him at first, but after I had read the newspapers again I wasn't so sure. They were full of the details of the escape and the history

of the convicts and that bank robbery. Lacôte, and a jade phœnix he had bought for luck, and the hatred the two fugitives would have for him were given a good deal of space, too. Dan drank too much and talked too much again a couple of evenings later and I questioned him. He was surly and he wouldn't commit himself, but the little he did say made me feel that he was Jules Lacôte and that his phœnix was the one the newspapers had mentioned. Dan's past had always been a mystery to me, but I knew he had come from France twenty-five years before, so the dates were about right. He must be Lacôte.

"It was then that I thought of letting the convicts know where Dan was. The press, as I have just said, had made a good deal of their hatred of Lacôte and it occurred to me that their feelings towards him might be powerful enough to overcome their fear of capture and bring them up here. There was only one way in which I could get to them the information that they would need to have. I was sure they would get hold of their home town newspapers as time went on. I'm glad I did it. If you tell me that one of those men shot Dan I shall feel that I have accomplished something useful. He wasn't fit to live. That's all."

Mrs. Parados stopped as defiantly as she had begun and reached for a cigarette. Her attitude implied that her story was finished, but none of us believed that it was. She must have sensed our disbelief, for her hands began to tremble again.

"What are you going to do about it, M. Flique?" she demanded vehemently.

Flique spread his hands. "Have I not complimented madame?"

"You know what I mean!" she exclaimed furiously. "Don't stand there looking at me like that! Did those men kill my husband?"

Flique made the tormented woman wait perhaps half a minute before he answered.

"Does madame speak seriously?" he inquired mildly.

"What do you mean?"

Flique held up the pendant. "Has madame forgotten this?"

"What *do* you mean?"

"That monsieur offered madame the unbearable humiliation and that she could not content herself to wait for Messieurs le Balafré and Bec, who might never come at all."

"You are crazy!" Mrs. Parados screamed.

"Madame is not herself. Is it because I am about to remind her that Friday, the day monsieur was killed, was the anniversary of their wedding and the birthday of madame? Is it because I remind her that this trifle which monsieur purchased for—thirty-five cents, was it?—was his gift to madame on that tender occasion?"

"No, no, no!" Mrs. Parados was beating upon the arms of her chair.

"It was the final humiliation. Madame could stand no more—"

"You are lying! Tell him he's lying, Samuels! It isn't my pendant! I never saw it before!"

"A green stone is missing—you see!" Flique held the pendant in front of Mrs. Parados' agonized eyes. "But that excellent Manning found it on the floor of madame's room—and madame—"

"You devil!"

"—and madame knocked it out of her hand."

Mrs. Parados covered her face and rocked back and forth in her chair. She seemed to crouch in the center of a tiny universe flooded with stellar light, while we, her accusers, haunted the shadows outside.

"It was evening and madame went up to her room to

dress," Flique continued relentlessly. "Am I not right? *Mon dieu,* how it burned her hand, that trifle. She could not bear it. Monsieur had killed something within—"

"Flique—listen to me. I didn't do it!"

"The excellent Manning prepares her bath. Madame undresses and puts on her gown—her blue gown. The trifle still burns her hand and she thrusts it deep into her pocket. But a little hall connects madame's chamber with her bathroom, and a door in the hall opens upon the roof. Madame has closed the door of her chamber. She looks through the glass and sees that the patio door of the library is open and filled with light, and in it—in it is monsieur. Madame touches the pendant in her pocket. It is a flame—*un serpent*—"

"Oh, God!" the distracted woman screamed. "Make him stop! I couldn't have done it!"

"It bites her flesh. A madness leaps up in her brain. It drives her onto the roof—down the stair holding her gown close around her body—*mon dieu,* how she runs! To the patio window where monsieur stands."

"It was some one else, I tell you! Just before I got to him. You've got to believe me! I couldn't have killed him. I had nothing—no weapon. Oh, please believe me. Some one else did it!"

"And when monsieur fell at her feet and madame bent over him to see if he was dead, the pendant in her hand, he clutched at it with his dying strength . . . and caught the price ticket . . . and broke the string."

Mrs. Parados shut her eyes again as Flique stopped. I found myself drawing a breath of relief. Flique lived for the dramatic, I believe. Everything he did or said aroused in one an emotional as well as a mental reaction. Kirk retrieved his hat, which he had dropped and forgotten to pick up, Samuels touched a match to his cigar, which had gone out several minutes before.

When Mrs. Parados opened her eyes again their calm-

ness astonished me. Something of Miss Jahries' tragic resignation was in them, I thought. Miss Jahries at that instant came to Mrs. Parados' side and took her hand, and I realized that they had met on the level of a common experience.

"The pendant is mine," Mrs. Parados said quietly. "Dan gave it to me. It was the unbearable humiliation, as you said. It made me crazy. I did rush down the outside stair. And he clutched at the pendant and broke off the tag. But I did not kill him. He was standing in the window and he fell back into the room before I got to him. Some one had shot him. Some one else. I don't know who it was. But I was terrified. It had been in my heart to do him an injury, to kill him, if I could, perhaps, and I lost my head completely. That was why I didn't announce what had happened. Afterwards, when my first terror had passed, I realized what I ought to have done. It was too late, then. Everybody knew how I hated Dan and I could not speak without throwing suspicion on myself. I stamped the pendant into the soil beneath the coprosma. I didn't know what else to do with it. When I got upstairs again I looked back and saw Mr. Annersley slip into the library and shut the patio window behind him. I thought he had shot Dan, but you say he couldn't have. There, I have told you everything. You don't believe me, of course."

I didn't know whether we did or not. At first, I had been sure that Mrs. Parados was guilty. Now I wasn't so sure. Too many elements had to be taken into consideration for me to hazard an opinion about anything. The weapon, for instance. Where had Mrs. Parados got a pistol equipped with a silencer? Perhaps Parados had possessed one and she had killed him with his own weapon, but the point had still to be established. Then there was Grainger's death. If she had killed Parados, she had killed Grainger, but Flique had not said anything about

that. Also, there were the many points of evidence Flique had pronounced significant. They seemed to be left over like the surplus parts of a puzzle that has been improperly assembled. Flique would give us our cue, I did not doubt, but Flique, as usual, was taking his time about it.

"Well, what's the answer?" Samuels demanded impatiently.

Flique had been meditating. "Madame has told us her little mystery," he said briskly, looking up. "Clearly, she did not kill monsieur, her husband."

"You do believe me!" Mrs. Parados sobbed thankfully, clasping her hands.

"I believe that madame did not fire those shots," Flique said coldly. "But must I remind her that the—um—indirect responsibility is hers?"

"You refer to those advertisements?" Samuels asked sharply.

"*Mais oui.* Did they not bring M. Parados and that poor Grainger to their deaths?"

"You know that?" Samuels shouted. "You are sure?"

"Would I have said so, if it were not so?" Flique inquired, twirling his mustache.

"Are you telling me that le Balafré and Bec killed Parados and Grainger?" Samuels swept on tempestuously. "How do you know? Do you know? Can you prove it? Do you know where they are? Can you take me to them?"

Flique lifted his plump hands in protest. "I implore a favor, *mon ami.* Grant me half an hour. Then shall I tell you what you desire to know."

Samuels gave him a long look. "All right," he muttered. "I hope you are not bluffing."

"Monsieur shall have the glory," Flique said, bowing.

Flique's attitude may have been all very well from his point of view, but it struck me as being unnecessary and deliberately confusing. He had implied that le Balafré and Bec had killed Parados and Grainger, but he had not

actually said so; moreover, the evidence he had declared to be significant—his "living tissue"—did not appear to connect them with either crime. On the other hand, his evidence did not appear to implicate any one else. I thought that Samuels was showing a good deal of patience.

Flique must have divined what was going on in my mind, for he turned to me with a twinkle.

"The little mademoiselle—where is she?" he inquired. "You have not forgotten her, M. l'Antiquaire?"

I had been hoping that I would be able to tell Caroline that she was definitely clear of this abominable business. Flique's suggestion that I spend the next half hour in her company was an excellent one, however, and I thought I might as well act upon it.

"Has any one seen Miss Brent?" I inquired, as I went towards the door.

Miss Jahries seemed surprised.

"Didn't you and M. Flique meet her as you came back from the fort?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Why?"

"Mrs. Parados and I saw her in the hall as we came in about the pendant. She asked us where you and M. Flique were. I told her I thought you had gone to the fort and she said she would go and meet you."

"Did you see her leave the house?"

"No. She went upstairs for her coat."

"It's quite possible that she left by the front door as we came in through the patio," I said. "Or she may not have gone out at all. Perhaps she is in her room."

"You will look, monsieur," Flique said sharply.

XXV

IN THE CIRCLE OF LIGHT

I WONDERED at his tone as I ran upstairs. Caroline was not in her room nor out on the roof. I called her name several times. As I reëntered the library, Flique spoke into the telephone.

"M. le Professeur," he said. "Has Mlle. Brent come to the fort? *Non.* If she does, you will so inform us, please . . . I thank you."

"Probably she's out in the grounds," Samuels muttered, as Flique rang off. "Or she may have stopped somewhere along the fort trail."

"Surely that is it, monsieur, but I would have the certain knowledge. When a man knows—then he is at peace with himself. One of your men shall inspect the trail and we shall look in the grounds, yes?"

Samuels nodded. "Kirk," he said, "you go. Phone back from the fort."

Flique's manner alarmed me and I should have gone myself if I had not still thought we were more likely to find Caroline in the vicinity of the house.

"You don't think anything has happened to her, do you?" I asked anxiously. "You are not keeping anything back, are you?"

"What would I keep from you?" he demanded reproachfully. "Have I not said that all I desire is the certain knowledge that mademoiselle is safe? Come, we shall find her."

His tone was intended to be reassuring, but I did not find it so. His eyes were troubled. Their expression frightened me . . . more than Caroline's absence did.

Yet I could not believe that Caroline would not turn up of her own accord within the next few minutes. The opposite was inconceivable . . . yet. Hurrying outside, I began a systematic tour of the grounds and service buildings, visiting in turn the front terrace, the gardens, the garage, the pergola, the boathouse, and the patio, calling Caroline's name as I went. Flique and Samuels and the others duplicated my search.

As I came to the foot of the outside stair which led up to my room, the remote possibility that she might have been taken ill somewhere upstairs occurred to me and I ran up to the roof and through my room into the hall. Miss Jahries joined me here and we went from room to room. I even looked into the closets. Finally, we came to the room in which the bodies of Parados and Grainger lay. Like my room and Caroline's, it opened out upon the parapeted roof above the library. The closet of this room was locked and the key was missing, but I banged upon the door and called Caroline's name, absurd as I felt such a proceeding to be.

As we ran downstairs, Flique and Samuels came into the hall, followed by Annersley and Celia—Celia clinging to her lover's arm as if she was afraid she might lose him again. The telephone in the library rang. Samuels beat me to it. The others crowded into the room after us.

"Not there?" Samuels said into the instrument. "He hasn't seen her, eh? . . . You'd better remain over there until I give you a ring."

We were silent as Samuels faced us, his eyes worried. Something had taken me by the throat. I could not speak.

"*Mes amis,*" Flique said sharply, "mademoiselle goes to meet M. Hunt and myself and she disappears—so! I do not like it. It may be serious, this matter. We shall search the island *immediátement.*"

"She can't have left the island," Samuels said. "We'll go over every inch of it."

My heart had turned cold at the gravity of Flique's tone and as my eyes met his, which had a thousand refinements of expression at their command, the substance of his thought flashed upon me, crystallizing the various apprehensions fermenting in my head.

"You are thinking of le Balafré and Bec!" I ejaculated. "They are here—they may have got hold of Caroline—is that what you mean? You *are* holding something back! What is it?"

"My friend, I know those little ones," he said gently. "Did I not tell you that the agony of their hatred would drive them here? It is a cancer eating their hearts. There is nothing else but that left in them. We spoke of liberty. To them it is a mockery if they cannot first burn the iron of their hatred into the body of Jules Lacôte. I know that *Ile du Diable.* I know le Balafré and Cicéron Bec. Fear would not hold them back."

"Are they here—on the island?" I cried. "Do you know that they are?"

Flique appeared to come to a decision.

"I shall tell you something," he said. "A letter from the French consul at Los Angeles was brought to me this afternoon. It told me, that letter, that le Balafré and Cicéron Bec were as far north as Ensenada four days ago—"

"That would be last Wednesday!" Samuels ejaculated. "Ensenada isn't more than a hundred and fifty miles south of here. They'd do it in six hours in a fast boat."

"They had a fast boat, monsieur," Flique continued grimly. "Does not the consul inform me that a launch, a fast one, was stolen in the harbor of Ensenada that Wednesday night? Two rascals beat the owner, a man of stocks and bonds, almost to the point of death, carried him off to sea, and put him out in an open boat. *Nom d'un chien,* I should not have liked that. He should have died, that unfortunate, but he did not. Yesterday he is dis-

covered and to-day he is able to speak and to describe one of those rascals. Messieurs, it is le Balafré, The Scarred One."

Flique could not resist the temptation to pronounce that sinister name with a flourish. The room became quiet. That cold wind I had felt when he had first tossed the names of the convicts into our faces blew through the room again. Flique had said that to them liberty was "a madness eating into the brain." Horror began to drill at my heart. They could have got to San Lucas early Wednesday morning. Parados had gone out Friday night . . . Grainger Saturday night . . . and now Caroline.

"It can't be that," I groaned. But I wasn't so sure, and I shouted in a frenzy: "Why should they take Caroline? Lacôte is dead. They could have no reason for coming back. It doesn't make sense!"

Flique's arm fell across my shoulder. *"Eh bien,"* he exclaimed, "do we know that they have taken her? Come, we shall look at the shining side. As you say, what reason had they for coming back? We shall find her around the corner, sound and safe, I do not doubt. You asked me what I knew and I have told you. But we waste time!"

I was not reassured, but the energizing briskness of his tone helped me to pull myself together. Samuels' brusque voice cut across the surface of my apprehensions.

"Miss Brent has got to be found," he was saying. "Every man on the island will take part in the search. Johns and Kirk will look after the south side of The Gut. The rest of us had better spread out like a fan. Gridley, you and Hendricks go to the head of The Gut, then continue straight up the slope. Annersley and I will veer off to the right of you. Flique, you and the Chinaman go north along the foot of the slope. Hunt, take the shore. She may have fallen over the cliff. We'll all work over to the other side of the island, then back. There's an

abandoned village over there somewhere, don't forget. Cover every foot of ground. There ought to be half a dozen flashlights available. If those birds le Balafré and Bec are on the island and you meet 'em, use your brains and God help you. Better take what guns you can find."

"We don't intend to stay here doing nothing," Celia announced, her head up. "At least, I don't."

"Nor I," Mrs. Parados said tensely, exhibiting a marked softening of the harsh corners of her personality. "I couldn't sit still—after what I have done. It's my fault—but I don't need to remind you of that."

"I shall help," Miss Jahries added.

Manning merely quivered.

"My orders are that you remain in the house," Samuels informed them bluntly. "I've got enough on my hands, as it is. If you leave the house you do so on your own responsibilities."

Celia laughed and Manning heaved a sigh of relief. The other two said nothing.

Four or five pistols were available, it turned out. I did not secure one of them. There were enough torches to go around, however. Celia, Mrs. Parados, and Miss Jahries declared their intention of combing the ground immediately beyond the edge of the four or five acres of developed estate in which the house stood. Samuels and Annersley argued the point spiritedly with them, but their minds were made up. Manning, afraid to be left alone in the house, attached herself to Miss Jahries.

As I started at a fast clip down to the beach by way of one of the cove trails, the demoniac malevolence of The Gut cut across my senses like a scourge. I seemed to be plowing through seas of sound. My head and ears were pounding, breathing became an ache, all sense of human nearness left me. I arrived at the beach in a lather of sweat. Not more than a dozen feet of wet sand divided the curling tongues of the breakers from the standstone

cliff and here and there they licked the toes of the cliff. The beach curved like a scimitar and I followed its arc at top speed, ripping the night open with my light beam and coming in a minute or so to the black mouth of The Gut, where I stood, drenched with spray and deafened with sound. Hissing water pierced by spires of rock on the one hand, and an unscalable wall of cliff on the other, guarded this side of The Gut.

Coming back, I threw my light along the jetty, into the boathouse, and over the Parados cruiser and the police boat, both of them powerfully engined crafts swinging restlessly at their moorings; then along the cement breakwater Parados had built halfway across the mouth of the cove.

A shoulder of rock jutted out into the surf at the northwest corner of the cove. It took me ten minutes to get around it to the west beach. Once I thought I was done for. The water was up to my waist, then to my chest, then to my shoulders. At that instant it swept me off my feet and hurled me against the cliff. My head took part of the blow and for a minute or so the night went around in circles. It was the next breaker that nearly got me. I barely managed to cling to a ledge of rocks with my finger tips. The water receded and I staggered through.

My head throbbed murderously above my right ear and after I had touched it I found blood on my hand. The wound did not appear to be deep, however, and I started down the beach; slowly, at first, and then, as my head cleared, at a good speed. Fortunately, the torch was not broken. At the end of a mile and a half of this I came up against a rocky abutment which extended some hundred yards or so out into the surf. No trail led around it and its surface was unscalable. Turning, I raced back along the beach, playing the light beam upon the face of the cliff with a view to discovering north of the cove a trail that would take me up to the top.

Not until I was a short distance north of where I thought the house would be did I find what I was looking for. The trail proved steeper than I had expected and halfway up I had to stop, pretty well fagged. I was losing more blood than I had supposed. Feeling better after a minute or so, I was on the point of starting up again when a beam of light, evidently from an electric torch, shot out over the top of the cliff in a horizontal direction a little to the right of me.

It vanished, reappeared, vanished; again it reappeared and vanished. Each time the light had flashed with the regularity of a signal.

So far as I knew everybody had left the house. The women might have returned, but even if they had I could not conceive of any reason why they should signal out to sea—they, or any of our group, for that matter. Inland, or to me down on the beach—that would have been understandable.

"It looks queer," I muttered. "Better find out."

As I pulled myself over the edge of the cliff, the light flashed again—once. A hundred yards south of where I stood was the house. The light had seemed to come from the parapeted roof to which my room, Caroline's, and the room in which lay the remains of Parados and Grainger gave access. This time I caught an answering gleam somewhat south of the house and not far off shore.

My first impulse was to approach the roof by way of the outside stair, but I quickly suppressed it. I wanted to see the signaler before he saw me and to do so I must come upon him from the rear. Skirting the cypress trees, I made my way to the northwest corner of the house and from there to the rear door, where I had left my shoes. The door was ajar. I entered, paused, glided across the kitchen to the hall, and arrived noiselessly at the foot of the stair.

Here I paused and listened again. The hall and most

of the lower rooms were lighted, and my ears were by this sufficiently attuned to the disruptive violence of The Gut for them to have detected any inside noise, but I saw no one and heard nothing. Nevertheless, I knew that I was not alone in the house. The present was one of those moments in which the senses are abnormally responsive to the psychical manifestations of other personalities. My certainty had an inward authority. It sent me up the stair like a shadow.

At the top I paused once more. Caroline's room was lighted and the door was ajar. After deliberating a moment, I slipped across the corridor and looked into the room. It was empty. My own room was the next and I had stopped in front of it when my eyes were drawn to the door which occupied the wall at the end of the corridor. It fascinated me—because Parados and Grainger were behind it, perhaps. At any rate, I found myself moving stealthily towards it. My throat was dry. I felt as if I were moving through a tomb peopled with the living. My hand trembled as I put it upon the door. The door was not locked, but at first I hadn't the strength to push it open. Then it gave slowly, noiselessly, before my gentle pressure. The room was in darkness.

Nothing happened for a moment; I heard no sound; then my face was suddenly ringed in light. My own torch was still in my left hand, but I had forgotten it and my fingers released the switch without the consent of my will. It parried the first beam and cut a second circle out of the darkness. Into the second circle leaped a face that was of neither the living nor the dead.

A scream rang through the room.

"Allan!"

The face had leaped at me. Something fell upon my head and I dropped.

XXVI

THREE MEN OF BABYLON

CAROLINE'S scream was a lamp that lighted me down through whirling darkness until it went out in the gale whistling past my ears. Just how long I lay on the floor I never knew, for I had lost all track of time. Half an hour, perhaps. It could hardly have been less. A swarm of bees droning in my ears presently told me that I was still alive.

My head was a ring of agony, my stomach was crawling up into my throat. Neither mattered, of course. The supremely vital thing was that my torch had revealed to me the livid face of le Balafré and that Caroline had been with him. It was not the crooked scar on the man's right cheek bone, nor yet the features of his face which had startled me into thinking of him as being of neither the living nor the dead, but a certain look which I can only describe as that of a man who has lived too long in the shadow of his own hatred. It was ghastly in effect. Without it his face would have been a cadaverous emptiness with two burning blacknesses for eyes.

Caroline had been with him and my own incompetency had left her with him! I had to hold my head between my hands to check the horror plucking at my reason. A launch had come in. Bec would have been in it. They'd be gone now. What was I to do? What could I do?

"Where are they taking her to?" I cried. "Why are they taking her? What use can she be to them?" And then: "This won't do. You've got to keep your head."

Climbing unsteadily to my feet, I switched on the light. The bodies of Grainger and Parados lay side by side. An undertaker had already prepared them for burial.

The closet door was open. It had been shut and locked, the key gone, when Miss Jahries and I had come into the room half an hour before. I had hammered on the door and felt like an idiot for doing so. The garments in the closet were thrown about in confusion, I saw. A key was in the lock inside the door. Evidently le Balafré had locked Caroline and himself in the closet and threatened to kill her if she made their presence known.

I reeled out onto the roof where the cool air revived me, although it sliced through my sodden clothing. A short distance off shore a light was visible. It was traveling north at a fast clip. A small craft, I decided. Was it the one I had seen putting into the cove? Perhaps—one chance in ten, say! That was all I needed. There were two fast cruisers at the jetty.

Nothing beats a forlorn hope for putting starch into a man. I flew down the outside stair and along the cliff to the cove trail I had used a short while before. Three minutes brought me onto the jetty. Dropping into the cockpit of the Parados cruiser, I felt my way to the engine and fumbled for the starter . . . found it. The mechanism whirred, but the engine did not fire. I felt for matches . . . Mine were wet and I stumbled into the cabin, feeling for the light switch. A tiny globe in the low ceiling became alive. Matches lay on the table. Shivering, I made my way back to the engine and bent over it, striking a match. The spark plug wires had been wrenched out and the gasoline feed line broken. I threw myself aboard the police launch. Its engine had been disabled in precisely the same way.

Sick with despair, I fell back against the rail. My brain scorched the walls of my skull. I wanted to fling myself overboard. Why hadn't I done this?—that?—the other thing? I suppose I was as near to insanity at that moment as a man can come without actually crossing the line.

"Good God, what could I have done?" I groaned.

But after a minute or so I was able to think with some degree of coherence. Caroline had run into le Balafré as she set out to meet Flique and me, I supposed, and he had had either to kill her or keep her quiet until he could get away. But why had he taken her aboard their launch when Bec put into the cove? Sex occurred to me, but I did not entertain it seriously. A definite motive, something to do with their revenge scheme, perhaps, was behind the abduction. After nursing their hatred of Lacôte through the fetid horror of Devil's Island for twenty years and risking their necks by coming to San Lucas, they would not have gone amuck at the prospect of a sex adventure.

Le Balafré's reason for being near the house at all looked equally inexplicable. Parados was Lacôte and Lacôte was dead, killed, presumably, by the convicts themselves. Why then should le Balafré come back, since their revenge was consummated? An idea occurred to me. Was it possible that le Balafré and Bec had not killed Parados and that they had not known until this evening that he was dead? The inevitable question followed. If they had not killed Parados, who had? And then I was back where I had begun. Why had the convicts taken Caroline? The sex motive recurred to me, but I refused to accept it.

A fantastic notion suddenly brought me up standing. That afternoon on the ridge above the village Caroline had been sure she had seen some one move on one of the wharves far below us. I had laughed at her. Had she been right? And if she had been, was it one of the French convicts whom she had seen? Perhaps! No one ever went there. The village would have made an ideal temporary headquarters. But above all, *were they taking Caroline there now?*

It was a desperate hope, not a reasonable theory, but

it was enough to send me flying along the jetty towards the foot of the cliff trail. I could think of half a dozen reasons why le Balafré and Bec should not go back to the village, assuming that they had used it as a temporary lodging, and of none why they should. It was a hunch that I was following—Morrison never will manage to break my faith in my intuitions. If my hunch was sound, I'd have plenty of time afterwards to think of Messieurs le Balafré and Bec's reasons for returning to the village. The probability that it wasn't I pushed into the back of my mind.

My feet were in bad condition by the time I got to the top of the trail and I realized that I should have to expend a precious minute getting foot gear. Fortunately, I had another pair of shoes in my suitcase. As I limped up the outside stair, I tore off my wet coat and shirt, replacing them, after I got into my shoes, with the light overcoat I had brought with me to the island. I didn't dare to take the time to change my other garments. My flashlight was broken, I found.

I had supposed that the house was empty, but as I ran down the stair to the hall I heard a small noise that might have been a sob or a groan. It seemed to come from the vicinity of Miss Jahries' room. The door was shut. I knocked. There was no reply and I pushed into the room, turning the switch, for the room was in darkness. Manning lay across the bed, her head buried in a pillow.

"Get up," I said. "This is Mr. Hunt. Where are the others?"

As she did not move, I hoisted her quivering with fear onto her feet. She screamed at sight of my face, which was not surprising, as I must have been a gory looking object. A valuable minute was lost in reassuring her.

"Where are the others?" I repeated sharply.

"I don't know, sir. I don't know anything." She began to weep hysterically. "They haven't come back. I wish

I'd never come to this wicked house. I heard Miss Brent's voice upstairs—and another voice—a man's."

"What did he say?" I shouted.

"I don't know. I don't know anything. Oh, he had a funny voice—like—like Mr. Flique's. And he said—he said something about a village—oh, Mr. Hunt, you are hurting my arm—oh!"

"Was that all you heard?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, dear— Oh, my arm!"

"Pull yourself together and listen to what I say." I shook her violently. "You aren't in any danger. Try and find Flique or Samuels—any of them. Tell them I've gone to the old fishing village—that Miss Brent is there. You understand?"

She nodded stupidly and I left her, in a white heat of excitement. The house behind me, I headed for the slope at a sharp trot, taking a northeasterly direction, as I intended to cross it by a trail Caroline and I had found that afternoon. The trail belted the waist of the island, rising crookedly to a saddle in the slope and dropping steeply to a point half a mile or so south of the deserted village. I had perhaps four miles to go, the launch eight or ten, according to the contour of the coast. The launch would arrive first, I knew—perhaps it was there already—but I did not force my pace, although the impulse to do so was about as much as I could resist. My sharp trot would get me there sooner in the long run and in better condition to tackle what awaited me.

I did not speculate. My job was to get Caroline out of the hands of those two maniacs. If I failed again, I should not have the courage to go on living. I saw no sign of any of the others. This was not surprising, as the island occupied some eighteen or twenty square miles of space.

Half an hour of this steady gait found me sliding down the east side of the slope. Reaching the bottom, I turned

north and ran at the top of my speed, little devils of dread snapping at the heels of my brain.

At first, the buildings of the village and the wharves and the beached hulks were formless blurs against the black firmament. And then, as a I drew nearer, the deserted settlement became an ancient crooked hand: the wharves three decrepit fingers that had lost their grip on life, the hulks warty growths upon the fleshless bone. But as I entered the village, I knew it for what it was and for nothing else: the symbol of one man's hatred. Hatred? The recurrent motif blew upon my emotions until consciousness sheeted into flame flying before the wind. Without doubt I was mad.

At the head of the second wharf, the one on which Caroline had declared she had seen some one move, I stopped. There was no sign of a launch, or of any living being but myself; there was no light, and no movement or sound but the quiet lapping of the ebbing tide. I seemed to stand in a vacuum, the night a black casque on my head. The oppressive emptiness of the place turned me sick. Why had I come? There was no one here. Good God, what had I been thinking of?

I shook myself. That wouldn't do. I had not given the place a chance. Perhaps the launch had not yet arrived. That wouldn't do, either. If the cove had been the destination of the convicts their launch was out there somewhere.

The wharf attracted me. I started along it, cautiously picking my way over the rotten planking. The salty, kelpy smell of old wharves rose to my nostrils. I wanted to go to the end of it. Why, I did not know. I was quite sane now. It was just one of those things one cannot explain. I moved with absolute quietness, a shadow of a man, the darkness opening and shutting behind me like a door. The wharf was some twenty-five feet wide and perhaps two hundred feet long. Several dilapidated sheds,

built for the housing of tackle and sundry other equipment, I supposed, occupied the lower end of it.

Suddenly, I stopped.

I had to stop. The wharf was broken in two. Where I now stood, some hundred feet from the beach, the piling had collapsed beneath the weight of planking and horizontal beams. A gap perhaps ten feet wide separated the two sections. It was impossible to get across the gap, except by swimming or boat. The lower half, the half upon which the sheds stood, formed a little island—a little fortress. No, that wasn't the word. And then I thought perhaps it was, after all, for just then I saw a light.

A mere thread of a light it was. In a twinkling it had gone. I breathed deeply, gratefully. They were there and Caroline was with them. Not a shadow of a doubt of this lingered in my mind. How was I to get her away from them? I hadn't even a pocket-knife.

As my eyes drilled into the darkness that shrouded the other side of the wharf, something heaved itself up, stood erect and became the figure of a man. I dropped, my heart in my throat, thinking that I had been seen. Nothing happened to confirm this fear, however, and I concluded that the background of the island had absorbed my figure.

His was a mere blur that effectually concealed his identity, although I supposed he was either le Balafré or Bec; then I heard the faint dripping of his garments as he wrung them and I knew better. He would be Flique or Samuels—the former, I hoped. A breaker sloshed around the piling just then and he did not hear my low whistle. By the time the water had subsided, he had moved down the wharf and passed from sight. I did not dare to risk a louder whistle.

Slipping out of my shoes and overcoat, I let myself down over the edge of the wharf, which was some four feet above the water. I hung there for an instant, the

water up to my knees, then I hooked my right arm around one of the piles and slid cautiously down it. The cold pinched my flesh, but the moment my head went under reaction set in. Bobbing up on the other side of the gap, I clung to a pile for an instant. The tide was ebbing fast.

Letting go, I was swept along some twenty-five feet or so, when I anchored myself to another pile—the one up which the man had climbed, I thought, as several cross pieces were nailed upon it, forming a ladder. My hand was upon one of these cross pieces when I heard a voice. What it said I could not make out, but a penetrating metallic quality in its tone recalled to my mind the livid face and burning eyes of le Balafré.

The voice was blown towards me through the piling from a point somewhere under the wharf and I listened attentively, peering in the direction from which it had come. The slosh and gurgle of the water was all I heard now, but I did see something. A barricade of planking erected against two of the center piles in a cross-wise direction, it looked like; moreover, as I continued to stare at it, I thought the planking made a right angle turn and ran lengthwise with the wharf.

I knew in a flash what it was. The convicts had either built an oblong enclosure large enough to give their launch secret harborage, or they had found some sort of an enclosure there and adapted it to their needs. The latter, probably. A carelessly erected barricade of rotting planking beneath a ruined wharf would not be apt to attract the attention of any one putting casually into the cove. It was not unlikely, indeed, that they had broken the gap in the wharf to more effectively isolate themselves.

A trap would connect the enclosure with one of the sheds on the wharf, I supposed, and it occurred to me that I could not do better than make use of it. Flique—or Samuels—would have his hands full, as I doubted if

either le Balafré or Bec would be taken alive, and I felt pretty sure that my share in the attack would be more effective if I rose unexpectedly from the cove than if I followed Flique—or Samuels—along the wharf to the shed. Striking out for the barricade, I found finger and toe hold in the planking—as I had surmised, it had been thrown together with deliberate carelessness—and hoisted myself to the top, which was some two feet below the wharf.

Inside the enclosure, an oblong, three-sided structure, the launch I had expected to find, a powerfully-engined, speedy-looking craft, swung at its moorings. At high or low water it would be concealed, as it was now, from any one who might pass on either side of the wharf. A rectangle of light descended from a trap in the floor of the shed into the cockpit of the launch, which was empty. The light, I realized now, had made it possible for me to see the barricade. Iron bars driven into one of the piles gave access to the shed above.

(I learned afterwards that the Portuguese villagers had constructed this subterranean approach to the wharf to facilitate their casual smuggling operations.)

As I dropped into the enclosure and clung to the side of the launch, I heard le Balafré's voice again.

"You will tell us what we desire to know, mademoiselle."

"How can I tell you when I don't know? I don't! I don't! I've told you so a hundred times! If Parados wasn't Lacôte I don't know who Lacôte is—where he is! Oh, my wrist! Please! You are breaking it!"

Caroline's voice frantic with terror! What had she said? "If Parados wasn't Lacôte. . . . But he was Lacôte! At least, Flique . . . Good God, what did I care if he wasn't? Nothing mattered except those devils . . . bringing Caroline here . . . hurting her. Something inside my head exploded in bloody flame . . . a

sort of Roman candle. Two strokes brought me to the pile with the iron bars. Parados . . . not . . . Lacôte!

"I shall break it if mademoiselle will not tell us!"

"Oh, no, no, no!"

"Cicéron, you will take that other arm."

"Do I not have it, *mon ami?*" A different voice, this one, but of the same wicked pitch. "Come, *ma petite.* It will be *désagréable,* those broken arms."

"Mademoiselle!"

"I cannot! Oh, God help me! Allan, some one! My arm! Please be merciful!"

"A little more, my Cicéron, and she will open the heart. Come, mademoiselle. . . ."

I was not quite mad enough to be blind to the folly of what I was doing. As soon as my head appeared above the trap I'd get a bullet between my eyes and that would be the end of both of us. But I couldn't help it. My eyes and my lips and my hands were burning bits of that gaudy Roman candle. A man can stand only so much of some things.

But Destiny, of which I was to hear something from Flique a little later, intervened at the proper moment. As the top of my head reached the trap the cross bar upon which my feet were set broke away from the pile and I went down. Coming up, my head struck the side of the launch and if I had not automatically flung out my arm and clutched at the edge of the launch I should have gone down again. I had come up on the other side of the craft. Instead of swimming around it or diving under it to the pile, I began to haul myself aboard.

I had got one leg over the side when I noticed that the shed had become silent. I felt the silence, rather than became aware of it through the auditory sense. It pressed upon me as wind and fog do. At first, I thought I had been heard and I looked up; but there was only a tangle of rotting net hanging from a nail in the oblong of lighted

roof and wall above me. Perhaps Caroline had fainted. I prayed that she had. But it was not that, either, I decided, as I got my other leg over the rail.

Something had happened. A vital matter to Messieurs le Balafré and Bec, I thought. The silence pinned me to the floor of the launch.

A whisper floated down.

"Cicéron . . . *ça fenêtre la!*"

The window! Some one was there. The man I had seen, of course. I had forgotten him. My heart felt as if it were bursting, but I had sense enough not to move.

"Non, non!" Cicéron Bec screamed suddenly. *"Pas la fenêtre la porte."*

A door was opening! That would be Flique. It ought to be Flique. He would glory in this ironic finish. . . . A pistol cracked.

"Ah . . . mon dieu!" The cry was strangled in the throat it issued from. "Mon Cicéron . . . *ce salopard de Lacôte*—Jules Lacôte. . . ."

"Lacôte," he had said. Lacôte! Had I gone entirely mad? I was leaping to my feet when the oblong of light above me was darkened by the falling body of a man. The body struck my chest, almost pitching me overboard, and dropped in a huddle at my feet. It was le Balafré. A pistol was in his hand. He would not need it any more, I reflected, as I wrenched it out of his grasp.

The other pistol barked again and Cicéron Bec dropped as I stuck my head through the trap and saw him for the first time—in the moment of his death. My eyes flew to Caroline, who was crouched on the floor against the north wall of the shed. A lantern swung from a nail, smoking a little. The steady oscillation of the lantern and its uneven yellow flame caused the agony in her face to beat like a pulse. I went numb with horror. She did not see me. Her head was turned away from me, towards the

door, I supposed. I could not lift my eyes from the devastation in her face.

"I'm sorry, Miss Brent, but I am afraid it will not be possible for me to let you live."

I thought I had exhausted my ability to react to the unexpected, but I was wrong, for as that familiar voice fell upon my ears, I almost lost my unstable footing in the launch. The mind takes on an extraordinary activity at times. In a twinkling the various hints and items of information Flique had conveyed to me during the past two days flew together like the parts of a magic puzzle, forming a perfect whole.

"I suppose not," Caroline said in a shadowy voice. "You might as well get it over with." A touch of scorn gave body to her voice. "I'm not surprised it's you."

"Dear me, you must be an unusually discerning young lady. How did you guess, may I inquire?"

"I didn't like you much, but it wasn't that, of course." Caroline's voice strengthened, became rounded and full. "You pretended to adore animal life, yet you forgot to clean out your goldfish pond. The poor things were dying. Everything else was so perfect. Too perfect, perhaps. It bothered me. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I was going to speak to Mr. Hunt and M. Flique about it when I ran into le Balafré. You see, I could have told them who you were. Get it over with. I'm not afraid of you."

Professor Johns laughed. "We should have been good friends but for your unfortunate intuitions, Miss Brent. *'Quel dommage,'* as M. Flique would say. Curious how the little things trip one up, isn't it?"

His pistol was leveled at Caroline, his index finger was crooking upon the trigger. I thought I should never be able to discharge the weapon in my own hand. It does take courage to kill a man. That moment was, I believe,

a recapitulation of all the highly colored moments Caroline and I had endured during the past two days.

A report deafened me, but even then I was not sure which of us had fired. Not until Johns' pistol hand fell to his side and he turned sharply towards me, his glasses falling off and smashing upon the floor, was I sure. Profound amazement agitated the expression of benevolent wisdom he had cultivated so assiduously these twenty years; and then, as the spiritual essence of the man won its release, its sinister stain discolored the fragile pallor of his face and established his kinship with those other men of Babylon, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec. Half turning with a spasmodic movement of his slender body, he sidled out through the door behind him and dropped. His left arm, outflung from his body, remained within the range of the light. His hand, palm up, fluttered like a wounded yellow bird and became still.

"Allan!" Caroline wept, as I dropped beside her. "Is it really true?" I could not speak and she laughed hysterically and took my streaming face between her hands and kissed me. "Oh, Allan, it's just like the movies!"

I held her in my arms until Flique came.

XXVII

THE MAN WHO WENT TOO FAR

THERE is an astonishing tenacity about life, at times. When Flique bent over Johns it turned out that he was not yet dead, although he had not long to live. Nor had consciousness entirely left him, for after we had made him as comfortable as we could he revived a little and evidenced a disposition to speak.

"A good shot, Hunt." His words were leaves falling. "I don't know that I'm sorry . . . now. A young man in love . . . strange things. Why is it, Flique?"

"It is the madness, *mon pauvre* Jules," Flique said gently, actually wiping his eyes. "Do I not know?"

A deep aching sigh from Caroline who stood just behind us brought me up to her side. I led her down to the end of the wharf and kept her there while Flique talked with Johns and ushered him out of life. There is antiseptic quality about solitude and darkness and clean salt air and I wanted it to heal the mental wounds her experiences must have inflicted. I did not let her talk much. There was not a great deal I did not know or had not guessed at. What she said came in little swift rushes isolated by deep silences as revealing as her stark, clipped sentences.

As Miss Jahries had said, Caroline had gone upstairs for her coat. She had taken it into her head to go down by the outside stair and on the roof she had met le Balafré, who was at that moment leaving the room in which the bodies of Parados and Grainger lay. His purpose in coming was to satisfy himself and Bec that Parados either was or was not Jules Lacôte and he had found two dead men, neither of whom was Lacôte. He had walked across

the island, but Bec was standing off shore in the launch in case his accomplice should have occasion to signal.

Le Balafré was in a hazardous position. Obviously, he could not let Caroline go. He must either kill her or take her with him. It occurred to him, then, that she might know something of the present identity and exact whereabouts of Lacôte, as he still believed that Lacôte was either on the island or in the habit of coming to it. Undoubtedly, it was this idea of le Balafré's that saved Caroline's life. His problem now was to get her away undetected to some safe place—the village, perhaps—where he and Bec might be able to force out of her the information they needed to complete whatever fantastic scheme of revenge they had concocted. He held a knife at Caroline's back and led her to the top of the outside stair. Just then Annersley and Celia strolled by and le Balafré threatened to kill Caroline if she gave him away.

"He would have," Caroline whispered. "I—I could almost feel it in my flesh. He wasn't like a living person. . . . Oh, I can't explain. He had the functions of the living, but he—he seemed to be a dead man walking. Being near him petrified me."

Silence fell again and I held Caroline closer.

"Celia and Annersley had frightened him. He thought he mightn't be able to get away with me. I—I think he nearly killed me, then, Allan. . . . He made me go into the room in which Parados and Grainger lay. Some one ran upstairs. He was afraid whoever it was might come into the room and he forced me into that closet with him. When you called to me his knife was pricking my flesh. He threatened to kill you, too. . . . And then, when you had all left the house and he thought it was safe, he signalled to Bec . . . and you came back. Oh, Allan, I thought he had killed you!"

They had let her alone on the launch, but when they got her into the shed they soon made it clear that they

were prepared to go to any lengths to get the information both of them believed she possessed.

"I couldn't have stood it much longer. I suppose I would have fainted. If I'd been sure it was Johns I'd have told them, but I wasn't . . . although I could not understand how he could have left those poor goldfish in that stagnant pool, if he was as passionately fond of living things as he pretended to be. It had bothered me so much that I couldn't wait until you and M. Flique got back to tell you about it. But I didn't *know.* And then Johns came . . . and Johns *was* Lacôte. . . . And then you . . . Allan."

I wouldn't let her talk any more and we remained silent until Flique touched me on the shoulder. . . .

Flique's fondness for an audience asserted itself as soon as we got back to the house, for he insisted on the presence of every one of us, Manning and Lum We included, in the library before he would give us a word of his final summing up of the tragic affair. Our heads counted, he plunged into his story.

His "little game," Flique contended, had justified itself in that it had revealed the general detestation in which Parados was held. The first clew of importance was Johns' avowal that it was he who had telephoned to Parados at twenty-five minutes of seven. What did it mean, that telephone call? We should see. Monsieur went to the patio window—there madame saw him. Madame ran down the stair with madness in her breast and just before she reached the patio window monsieur fell with a bullet through his heart. Madame departed in panic, leaving the price ticket in monsieur's hand. Perhaps five minutes later M. Annersley appeared . . . and then Mlle. Jahries. M. le Deputy comprehends?

"I do not," Samuels admitted in a tired voice. "Johns was in his tower two hundred yards away. We know he

was there. He could not have shot Parados with a pistol at that range—yet we know that he did. Go ahead, Flique."

"Monsieur is killed," Flique continued, bowing. "What have we? A rose petal—a blackness in the carpet—a journal with oil stains—M. l'Antiquaire's statement as to the curious behavior of M. Annersley—M. Annersley's rose—the rose Grainger dropped into that waste basket—the affair of the jade phœnix—and *l'étiquette* in the dead hand of monsieur. But these clews, *mes amis*—they indicate the little mysteries, that is all. How do I know this truth, you ask?" Flique shrugged and twirled his mustache. "A Cellini cannot explain his art. I am the principal agent of *la Sureté*. But I have said there is one important clew—the telephone call. And then, messieurs et mesdames, that poor Grainger is killed and there are many clews.

"Grainger, it would seem, has discovered something of the truth. Does he not say as much in the presence of that rascal Johns? A brave man, Grainger. Presently, I shall tell you what he has discovered. That young man Hendricks has given Johns a most excellent alibi, but Johns has lived in terror of the day when those little ones, le Balafré and Bec, may find him, and terror has eaten his heart away. *Très bien.* He must kill Grainger and have the perfect alibi."

"He couldn't have killed Grainger," Samuels interposed doggedly. "Grainger was killed with a pistol. We heard the shot fired in the library and we found the shell and the bullet. And Johns was in his tower at the time. Hunt saw him there and I telephoned to him."

"Yet he shot Grainger, monsieur—"

"I know it!" Samuels exclaimed vehemently. "It doesn't make sense. There's an unknown factor—"

"*Précisément,*" Flique agreed. "I shall proceed. Johns, I have said, would have the perfect alibi. A shot

must be fired in the house and Grainger must be killed while he, that Johns, is known to be in his tower. But it is dangerous, this passion for perfection. Also, he has forgotten the genius of Anatole Flique. That was the fatal error. Very well. Grainger is killed and now there are many clews. One should have a care about repeating one's successes. What have we? The cartridge case on the floor, the bit of twisted steel in Grainger's pocket, the fire in the grate, the match in Grainger's hand, the position of Grainger's body, the upset telephone, and, most important, M. le Deputy, the *open patio door.* To these must be added that other principal clew—the telephone call of M. le Professeur. And now, my friend, was I not generous? Did I not assure you that these were the principal clews?"

"Admitted," Samuels grunted. "Go ahead."

"Name of a pipe!" Flique exclaimed in apparent bewilderment. "Is it possible that monsieur does not yet comprehend?"

The whites of Samuels' eyes gleamed and I felt sorry for him.

"It is," he said, and I should have liked to compliment him on his restraint.

"Since Johns was in his tower when monsieur and Grainger were killed," Flique continued, "it is clear that he shot them from the tower. You will recall that monsieur was killed a few minutes after half-past six, Grainger at about half-past seven. Why was this? Because the evening tides of Friday and Saturday—remarkably high tides, were they not?—attained the height of their fury at about those hours. My friends, those two shots that *scélerat* Johns fired from his tower—from a darkened north window of his tower—could not be heard in the house because of the fury of The Gut."

"But we heard the shot that killed Grainger!" Samuels exploded.

"Non, non," Flique chuckled. "You just thought so. Patience, I implore of you. First, we shall consider the murder of monsieur. It is perhaps two hundred yards from this room to the tower. At night, when this room is lighted, one may look down into it from the north windows of the tower. Those windows and the patio window of the room are on a—um—that word, M. l'Antiquaire?"

"Diagonal line, do you mean?" I inquired.

"Mais oui. From the tower one may observe this writing table and the fireplace. It is clear that M. Johns, up in that top room, saw M. Hunt leave M. Parados. He then took up his telephone and summoned M. Parados, who answered the ring, as Mlle. Ferris, and M. Johns himself,—could he have done otherwise?—have testified. Perhaps they talked of the fury of The Gut, as that Johns said. I do not know. Is it not sufficient that monsieur stepped to the window and opened it, and that Johns shot him from the top window of his tower, and that monsieur dropped at the feet of madame, who approached the window at that wretched moment?"

"You can't tell me that any man with a pistol—"

"If M. le Deputy will contain himself but a moment longer—"

"Sorry," Samuels grunted, his eyes smoking.

"The alibi of Hendricks," Flique continued imperturbably, "supported M. Johns' statement that he had not left his tower. It was clever, you will concede. But what of the killing of that poor Grainger? M. Johns, I have said, aspired to perfection. The assassin, messieurs et mesdames—is he not the common you and I—how you say? —improperly balanced?

"Very well. This Johns, I have said, desired a shot to be discharged in the library at the moment he shoots Grainger from his tower. There was a problem for any man, you will admit, but those three, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec and Jules Lacôte—were they not devils of clever-

ness? And was not Jules Lacôte the cleverest of three? Grainger, M. Johns remembered, laid kindling in the grate each morning. He lighted it when M. Parados asked him to. And so, *mes amis,* M. Johns prepares a blank cartridge and some little while before the time of the high tide he conceals it among that kindling. Am I clear? When the flame heats the blank it will explode. No one but Grainger will light the kindling. That clever one, Johns, departs unobserved, as he came—by the patio window, which he leaves open. Which he *leaves open,* monsieur!"

"That was clever!" I exclaimed.

"Damned clever!" Samuels ejaculated. "But what about The Gut? He wouldn't be able to hear the shell go off in his tower room for the row in The Gut?"

"Has monsieur forgotten the telephone upset on the writing table?" Flique inquired. "Did not I assure him it was a principal clew—the living tissue? M. Johns left it so, my friend, and hurried back to his tower. And what then, you inquire? I suspect that clever one telephoned to Grainger, who would be in his room above the garage at that hour, and commanded him to light a fire in the library. And Grainger, who was the servant, would obey."

"That is just what happened," Celia interrupted brokenly. "I was in Father's room at the time, you remember. His telephone rang. It must have been Johns, although Father didn't say who it was. Perhaps he wasn't sure. Whoever it was wanted a fire in the library, he said, and he went down."

"He went down to his death," Flique resumed gently. "You have that picture, yes? M. Johns looks out of his dark tower window . . . his telephone and his weapon are ready. Grainger enters the patio . . . his step is slow and firm. Majesty sits on him. An admirable man, *votre père,* mademoiselle. His memory and that of the *grandmère* of Mlle. Brent are my treasures." Flique bowed to the two girls. "He is close to the window . . .

he enters. That rascal, Johns, has his telephone strapped to his ear . . . he seizes his weapon and presses closer to his window . . . and his heart, which terror has rotted, is ten mad drums. Outside The Gut is in torment. . . . Grainger enters. He bends forward . . . his broad back is towards the patio window . . . he strikes the match . . . the fire is kindled. A silence . . . then crack, as the heated shell in the grate explodes. It bangs upon the ear of M. Johns and in that instant he fires his weapon with an accuracy. . . . Messieurs et mesdames, it is done."

We were quiet for a minute or so after that, for Flique had given us a pretty vivid picture. Celia was weeping, and Caroline's arms were around her, and Annersley and I, looking at each other, were aware of a spiritual kinship the opposite of anything we had yet felt. Even Mrs. Parados was beginning to realize that tragedy might exist outside the confines of her own life.

"And I clinched his alibi by phoning to find out if he were in the tower," Samuels muttered in deep disgust. "What was the weapon, Flique? He couldn't have hit a man at two hundred yards with a pistol."

"It was a rifle, M. le Deputy."

"Nonsense!" Samuels exploded. "Do you mean to tell me that Geddes doesn't know his microscopes? Those bullets had the rifling marks of a Colt forty-five automatic pistol. We have that sort of thing down to a science."

"Monsieur has just said it was not a pistol—"

"Yes, yes.—I'm crazy. What's the answer?"

Flique twirled his mustache. "The weapon, monsieur, was a rifle—a rifle of the Springfield army pattern, and it had—"

"It couldn't have been!" Samuels shouted. "Didn't Geddes—? Oh, all right."

"—and it had," Flique continued imperturbably, but

enjoying himself hugely, nevertheless, "the rifling of a *Colt forty-five automatic pistol.*"

We were silent after that. Samuels drew a handkerchief across his forehead.

"That's a pretty big chunk to swallow," he said, at length. "It takes an expert to do a job like that."

Flique beamed. "Did I not inform you the night monsieur was killed that it was thought that the infamous Jules Lacôte once served in an arsenal of France? Clearly, he would have the knowledge. Did not poor Grainger, who was once a man of inventions, have a lathe in his workshop? Has not M. Annersley informed us that Grainger sometimes took the little vacation? On these occasions there remained on the island no one but M. Johns, who was that infamous Jules Lacôte. Now, M. le Deputy, would it be a difficult matter, I ask you, for that rascal to procure the tool with which to bore out that old rifling and increase the—um—the caliber from—.308, is it?—to .45?"

"Easy enough," Samuels admitted. "But that doesn't re-rifle the barrel with a Colt pistol rifling. The re-rifling is the big job—unless he sent it to a factory."

"That he would not do, monsieur. The rifling is the big job, as you say. It requires a delicacy—a precision. But to one who has served in an arsenal of France, who has the shrewdness, the hating, terrified heart, much time, and a trifle of money, it is nothing. Monsieur, that Johns had all of those. Poor Grainger's lathe is of the—um—the screw cutting type, is it? *Mais oui.* He would require the cutter rod and the head, perhaps even a different carriage for the lathe, but could he not procure them with ease, I ask you? And if certain trifles had to be made at a factory, what of that? Poor Grainger takes his little holiday and M. Johns employs his lathe to prepare the rifle that is to kill him."

"I guess you are right," Samuels said somberly. "He could have done it. He must have done it."

"*Précisément.* You shall see."

Flique took himself into the billiard room, reappearing an instant later with the game bag, the long steel rod he had found in Grainger's workshop, and a rifle—not the one I had relieved him of, but a nineteen six Springfield army rifle, although I scarcely recognized it as such, notwithstanding that I had carried one of them during the war. Most of the stock had been cut away from the barrel, around which had been sweated wide straps of steel, obviously for the purpose of strengthening it. The butt, also, had been cut down—to lessen the depth of the rifle, I suppose. Flique placed the game bag upon the table, leaned the rifle against the table, and presented the rod for Samuels' inspection.

"This rod, M. le Deputy—you have seen it before, yes? It is the cutter rod. This—" touching the metal piece into which the rod fitted "—is the cutter. As the grooves in the rifle are to be deepened this cutter may be raised by—um—inserting a trifle of paper under it. Monsieur understands—how you say it?—the process, *oui?*" Flique paused to twirl his mustache and puff out his cheeks, and Samuels shook his head impatiently. "The rod and the cutter—are they not pulled back through the barrel, turning, as they come, according to the—twist, is it?—that is desired? But yes. Thus, a shaving of steel is pared off, the rod returns, the cutter it is raised, and the artisan—does he not repeat that process until the rifling is finished?"

Flique now consulted some figures penciled on the back of an envelope—the envelope in which he had placed the fragment of steel shaving he had found under Grainger's lathe, I thought.

"The barrel of this rifle, *mes amis,*—it is the Springfield American army rifle of the year 1906—has four

grooves each four one-thousandths of an inch deep and each of those grooves turns once in ten inches; the barrel of the Colt pistol has six grooves, they are three one-thousandths of an inch deep and they turn once in sixteen inches." Flique shook the envelope and the steel shaving dropped into his hand. "This shaving, monsieur," he continued, "and that one we found in poor Grainger's pocket, are—um; I have not the head for figures—fifteen one-hundredths of an inch wide. That is the width of the grooves in the Colt pistol, also, it is the width of the grooves M. Johns cut in his rifle."

Flique now took up his rifle. "Monsieur has observed these bands of steel. Widening the bore of the rifle from the caliber .308 to the caliber .45 weakened the barrel and M. Johns—um—that imbecile English! The word, M. l'Antiquaire?" Flique demanded in a small fury.

"Compensated for the lessened resistance of the barrel —is that what you mean?" I ventured.

"I thank you, monsieur," Flique beamed, and he bowed. "That infamous Johns compensated for the lessened resistance of the barrel by strengthening it with these bands of steel." Flique put the rifle down. "The cartridge, *mes amis*—that was a nothing for one of his skill. Would he not remove the bullet from the .30 caliber rifle cartridge, cut off the thin end of the cartridge case, and force the .45 caliber pistol bullet into the rifle cartridge he had cut down? Also, he might reduce the charge of powder. My friends, that clever one's weapon is ready for the murder of monsieur.

"Clearly, M. Johns disposed of his tools when he had finished with them, and almost certainly he cast them into the sea; but perhaps he did not cast that rod far enough and poor Grainger found it one day when he looked to his lobster traps at the low tide. Also, M. Johns would gather up his shavings of steel, but perhaps the fragments M. Grainger and I found had been trod into the dirt be-

neath the lathe and he missed them. It does not matter. Where was the rifle, you ask? Certainly, M. Johns would not hide it in his tower. No, he would put it where no one would expect to find it—no one but Anatole Flique, perhaps," and the little man twirled his mustache. "And where was that but in the fat stomach of that old cannon in front of the fort?" Flique's face sobered. "Poor Grainger! Clearly, he was—how you say it?—reconstructing the murder of monsieur from the rod and his shaving of steel. A man of intelligence, Grainger!"

Samuels winced at that and so did I, for it seemed to me now that we should have deduced something of the truth from the facts Flique had flaunted in our faces so persistently. We were quiet for a minute or so, when Samuels asked the question that must have been in the minds of every one of us.

"What about the motive?" he said morosely. "Why did Johns kill Parados after living on San Lucas for twenty years?"

"That, monsieur, is a question," Flique resumed, spreading his hands. "Until that M. Johns died in my arms whispering to me in the tongue of his mother I could not have answered it. It was not much that he said, but enough. After those infamous ones, le Balafré, Cicéron Bec and Jules Lacôte had robbed the *Banque du Midi* they separated. *C'était nécessaire*—we of the police were hot behind. Was not *I* then an agent of the Marseilles *Sureté?* Lacôte had the money—a million francs. It was a vast sum in those days. Perhaps they trusted him—perhaps it was the—expediency, is it? Who can tell?

"And now, *mes amis,* Destiny plays the hand, as you say. Not often is it so, but sometimes, as you shall see. And if Destiny comes on green wings is it any the less Destiny? Man winds a little reel and the years spin and he thinks he is hooked to eternity. And then Destiny

laughs and the thread is broken. Destiny laughed when Lacôte bought the phœnix, and again when M. Parados took it for himself, again when le Balafré and Bec departed from *l'Ile du Diable* and madame sent her writing to the Marseilles journals, and yet again when Lum We stole the phœnix from its master.

"Messieurs et mesdames, Lacôte took the million francs to his room at the back of a tobacco vendor's shop along *la Cannebière*. But his phœnix, which he had bought from a merchant of antiques, stood on a shelf in his room. The vendor of tobacco saw it. Now, my friends, that vendor of tobacco had read of the affair at the *Banque du Midi*. A merchant of antiques, one of the patrons of the bank, had been shot, it appeared, and with his last breath he had told M. Anatole Flique—who is now the principal agent of *la Sureté*—that his assassin had bought a phœnix of jade from him the day before. You see? Destiny has laughed and the thread of that infamous Lacôte is broken. And that vendor of tobacco—who is he but Monsieur Parados? And Monsieur is a man of vision and he begins to spin his little reel.

"Monsieur approaches the unhappy Lacôte. That infamous one, who has blood on his hands and a million francs in his mattress, must divide his—loot, is it?—with monsieur, the vendor of tobacco, who will secretly send to M. Flique an information that will dispose of le Balafré and Bec. Also, monsieur will take the phœnix. Is it not the sign of his destiny? If the wretched Lacôte declines, monsieur's information will dispose of him as well. What can that unhappy Lacôte do? Is it not better that two instead of three should adorn that pit of hell, *l'Ile du Diable?* He yields. He has spirit, but it is not that of the martyrs.

"Very well. Monsieur's destiny brings him to California and Lacôte comes with him. He dare not stay in Marseilles—surely that is clear?—and monsieur prefers

to have the eye on him, as you say. And now in this enchanted land monsieur blooms like the rose. But what of Lacôte? He has blood on his hands, and monsieur had broken his spirit and got most of his half million of francs, and a spectre sits in his heart. Could it be otherwise? Has not Destiny laughed at him? If those little ones on *l'Ile du Diable* should break their bonds and find him—*mon dieu,* his soul is torn with the thought! The years fly—two—three—four—and he becomes a nothing—a fly speck on the bigness of monsieur who is still spinning his reel.

"Monsieur has a million of dollars and soon he has two. He is a man of power and sinister reputation. His instincts are those of a Cæsar and he craves an empire. And so he becomes *le siegneur de San Lucas.* And that gives the unhappy Lacôte, that note in the beaming brilliance of monsieur, his—um—inspiration. He would live on San Lucas, he would bury himself from the world and impose, on that trifle of his old self monsieur has permitted to live, a new personality. Monsieur is willing. That old fort—it must have a custodian. Why not Jules Lacôte, once the cleverest rascal of France? Monsieur laughs. He perceives an irony that amused his wicked heart.

"And so that daring Lacôte, who robbed the *Banque du Midi,* comes to the island San Lucas. But his fear of those little ones monsieur sent to *Ile du Diable* becomes an obsession—a specter that sits in his heart night and day. They will escape—*c'est certaine!* And if they should find him—*'Cré nom de nom!* His soul becomes dust. Clearly, his new personality must be a mask through which none shall see what is left of the greatest criminal of France—none but Monsieur Anatole Flique, perhaps, and he is on the other side of the earth. What shall it be, that mask? Ah, he will become Professeur Herbert Johns, scholar and student of the eye of the jelly-

fish. He will make himself master of that difficult subject. Who will think of associating so learned a one with Jules Lacôte?

"It is not easy, but he is driven by the scourge of his obsession. The years fly—five—ten—and M. le Professeur writes a book on the eye of the jellyfish, for always he had the clever brain, that infamous one. Two more years and another book comes from his learned pen, and behold! M. le Professeur is the greatest living authority on the eye of the jellyfish. The specter that sits in his heart has made him so.

"But if M. le Professeur is clever, also he is thorough. He shall be known for his good works as well as for his wisdom. And so, to the servants of monsieur, as they come and go, he is *le bon vieux savant.* Are there not silk stockings for the virtuous Manning, books and lessons for Hendricks, a pipe and the wine of philosophy for Grainger? And for the little ones that fly in the air and run on the earth an infinite tenderness? Is there not a lettuce patch for the rabbits and does not that clever one dream of his corner of the island becoming a sanctuary for the gulls and the pelicans? And the fort of San Lucas—was it not the flesh of his flesh? Would not its—um—desolation ravish his soul? And does not our M. l'Antiquaire find him with a crippled gull in his arms?"

"Flique!" I interrupted abruptly. "Was it that gull, not a rabbit, you had been after?"

"What else?" Flique beamed and bowed, deepening my chagrin. "Obviously that wing was not bruised, as M. Johns said, but broken, and I would look at it. The tendons of the wing had been cut with a blade. M. le Professeur desired that you should find him with a crippled gull in his arms.

"And so, messieurs et mesdames, that daring one who fled with a million francs and blood on his hands becomes M. le Professeur, scholar of repute and lover of the hu-

manities. Is it to be wondered at, I ask you, that Destiny could restrain its mirth no longer? The obsession of M. Johns—how you say it?—materialized: those little ones, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec, cast off their bonds. You will perceive the mad terror in his heart. Sacred name, if they should find him! And then he takes courage. Only monsieur knows. Monsieur will not tell. And then, my friends, Destiny laughs again. Madame sends her writing to the Marseilles journals. It is printed and madame has her clippings, no doubt, and monsieur finds one of them—"

"I intended that he should," Mrs. Parados said in a low voice.

"That was my belief, madame," Flique said, bowing. "Well, and what does monsieur do with his clippings? Consider his character, I implore you. Monsieur has a passion. What is it, but to nourish fear and hatred in the hearts of those around him? Madame Parados, M. Annersley, Lum We, Mlle. Jahries—they will tell me what monsieur did with his clipping. *Précisément!* He presented it to M. le Professeur.

"Ah, it is the grand joke, the magnificent! Monsieur has been chuckling over it for twenty years. That imbecile Lacôte building his citadel of jellyfish eyes and kind words and lettuce for the rabbits, and he, Dan Parados, with a snap of the finger accomplishing its ruin. *Mon dieu,* it is killing, that joke! Why should he not tell those little ones, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec, if they come to San Lucas, that M. le Professeur, the greatest living authority on the eye of the jellyfish was their little playmate? Eh, what is that? They will avenge themselves on monsieur? Let them try that monkey business and they'll find themselves back where they have come from with a quickness—yes, indeed! Nothing can harm monsieur. Does not the little green god that put a gold wand in his hand live in his house? While that is there nothing

can harm him! Monsieur's faith is magnificent, like his joke. Well, he is not the first pagan to have put his trust in that phœnix of jade. . . . But that joke on M. le Professeur! Name of a pipe, it is good! So loud is monsieur's laugh that he does not hear the chuckle of Destiny.

"Messieurs, it was the citadel that infamous Lacôte had built around himself, not the fort of San Lucas, that monsieur threatened to destroy. Would he have done it? Who am I to know that. M. le Professeur thought he would and that was enough. Had not le Balafré and Cicéron Bec sat in his heart for twenty-five years? Were not the fibers of his spirit straws in a wind? Monsieur is the only one who knows! that is his thought. It is an acid on his brain. And so . . . he prepares his weapon and his alibi that no one shall break . . . no one but Monsieur Anatole Flique. Afterwards, he will go away. . . .

"It was crowded, monsieur's last hour, for Lum We and M. Annersley and madame also would have a part of it. But what of that, I ask you? Has not Destiny a fondness for crowding her hours of reckoning? And so, *mes amis,* Destiny laughed again and monsieur's reel ceased to spin for the thread was broken. . . ."

We were silent for a minute or two after that and I think all of us were thankful for a moderation of the emotional strain we had been under. Cruelty to satisfy a lust for the spectacle of human agony is the most abominable of human vices and for the moment my reaction to this final manifestation of the cruelty of Parados' perverted instincts dulled my sense of the enormity of Johns' major crimes. Mrs. Parados—Lum We—Miss Jahries—Johns—the man's record was as black as the rites of an obscene cult.

"Messieurs et mesdames," Flique continued somberly, "it is not possible for a man to hide the light of himself behind a mask every minute of the hour. The mask will slip and the light will look out. So it was with M. le

Professeur. He had a passion for all living things, yet he forgot the goldfish in his pool! He was a notable scientist, yet he assured me that he had not the French, the language of science! And then, when I spoke to him in the French understanding was in his eyes. *Parbleu,* that was *négligent!* The light within him shone darkly into the eyes of Mlle. Brent. And Manning, who took the silk stockings, felt the broken iron in him and was afraid. And one day she beheld the broken iron in his face. . . . It is the little things, my friends, that mirror the heart.

"M. Johns was on the top of the island yesterday and he saw those little ones, le Balafré and Cicéron Bec, with the glasses. Had he not been watching? They had come for him and M. Johns made up his mind with a quickness. This evening he slipped away and found them . . . and Destiny laughed again. That is all. . . ."

Samuels presently was able to take the little man's hand.

"You've done a good job, Flique," he muttered huskily.

Flique bowed and twirled his mustache. "I am the principal agent of *la Sureté,* monsieur," he said. "Does one find littleness in high places?"

XXVIII

TWO PORTRAITS

WEDDING presents should come afterwards, long afterwards, when people are more likely to need their brightening influence, Caroline says. I am inclined to agree with her, as I am with everything Caroline says, although Morrison assures us that such acquiescence cannot endure.

There is some excellent cutlery from the Annersleys, a little green god from Lum We, and some marvelous old bronze andirons from Morrison. Mrs. Parados' gift already hangs over Morrison's andirons in the library and when Caroline comes into the room she stops and looks up at it and I find myself holding my breath. An enormous parcel arrived from Paris. As we slashed at the cords and tore the wrappings apart and dived through a tangle of packing material I don't know what we expected to find—anything, I imagine, but what we actually did find.

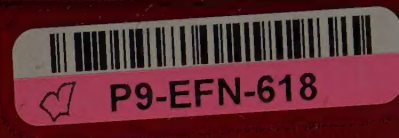
It is a full length portrait, almost a life-size portrait, of a little stout man in elegant evening regalia, fingering a carefully waxed mustache. His right hand is on his breast which is adorned with the decorations of many governments, and his pink face beams upon us and seems to draw us into his friendly embrace. An enormous gilt frame figured with rosebuds and cupids, evidently had at a reasonable figure, enhances the glory of the portrait.

"Well, I don't know," Caroline said doubtfully. She smiled at me then in a way that she has and I knew I should agree to anything she suggested. "Let's hang it

opposite Grandmother Brent once a week every year. Mr. Morrison can say what he likes." She was looking at me tenderly now. "After all, Allan, it was you who found me just in time, not M. Flique."

I saw no reason why I should not agree with her.

THE END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